やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru wata

illustration ぽんかん⑧

13
thirteen

GAGAGA

13
thirteen
渡 航
【wataru watari】
illustration
ぽんかん⑧

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Yukino and Yui

やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

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【ひきがや－はちまん】

雪ノ下雪乃……奉仕部部長。完璧主義者。
【ゆきのした－ゆきの】

由比ヶ浜結衣……八幡のクラスメイト。周りの顔色を伺いがち。
【ゆいがはま－ゆい】

戸塚彩加……テニス部。とても可愛いが男子。
【とつか－さいか】

川崎沙希……八幡のクラスメイト。ちょっと不良っぽい。
【かわさき－さき】

葉山隼人……八幡のクラスメイト。人気者。サッカー部。
【はやま－はやと】

三浦優美子……八幡のクラスメイト。クラスの女子の頂点に君臨する。
【みうら－ゆみこ】

海老名姫菜……八幡のクラスメイト。三浦グループだが腐女子。
【えびな－ひな】

一色いろは……サッカー部マネージャー。一年生で生徒会長に当選。
【いっしき－いろは】

材木座義輝……オタク。ラノベ作家になることを夢見る。
【ざいもくざ－よしてる】

折本かおり……八幡と同じ中学。海浜幕張総合高校生。
【おりもと－かおり】

平塚 静……国語教師。生活指導担当。
【ひらつか－しずか】

雪ノ下陽乃……雪乃の姉。大学生。
【ゆきのした－はるの】

比企谷小町……八幡の妹。中学三年生。
【ひきがや－こまち】

design：numata rina

Interlude 1

Again and again.

I look back again and again.

The distance widens and time passes.

I go far to the point I can't go back.

So that I can finally look back and remind myself of what was right.

Even while knowing this is a mistake, I persuade myself that this is the one and only answer.

Again and again.

I look back again and again.

At the first light of day.

At the trickling rain and dew of the early afternoon.

At the light snowfall dancing as they scatter in the twilight.

At the hazy moon shaking in the midnight.

There was always a place and opportunity to answer, and that time, it looked as if I would be guided towards the optimal solution.

However, it never looked as if the correct answer would be said.

Probably, maybe, surely.

I'd thought this was probably for the best.

I'd made an ambiguously grey decision that neither got it right nor far.

Maintaining a reasonable distance, not hurting anyone, neither right or wrong, fact or fiction, and unclear.

It wasn't that I couldn't say what I wanted to, I just didn't even know what I wanted to say.

What right did someone like that have to say?

That's why, at the very least.

I just want to be correct this time.

I don't want to forgive my errors or mistakes.

Because I can't afford to be wrong anymore.

Chapter 1: Earnestly, Hiratsuka Shizuka yearns for her past

Countless, countless times have I looked back.

Yet my feet keep moving forward, never stopping.

I let my heartbeat accelerate, let my breathing fall out of place, and refused to wipe off the accumulating sweat.

If I don't do this, every small detail might just become my excuse to stop. Yet this doesn't stop me from looking back again and again, how disgusting.

That image of a single teardrop right before we parted refuses to leave my head.

The remaining traces of rainwater on the road looking identical to the trace on her cheek. The puddles of water my running feet try to avoid, the unnatural, disrupted footwork, every step screaming, urging me to turn back.

But what can going back do for me? What should I say to do anything about the situation?

No, there is a solution lying somewhere in my heart. Yet my legs refuse to decide on any option, repeating its mechanical, yet unnatural movement.

Even if a standard option exists that isn't mine, that can't be our answer.

The sun slowly falls onto the horizon, turning itself crimson red.

The shadows of the houses elongate, to the point where they seem so close to blending in with the darkness from the faraway twilight. Refusing to be swallowed by this darkness, I continue to run forward.

Every step feels solid, yet thoughts are floating with no direction.

Thinking about what that teardrop meant, my thoughts fall deep, to the point of witnessing every reason possible. However no conclusion could be made out of them, and all clues were found only to be left behind.

Just like everything that happened, just like how everything has been done.

The path leads straight towards the sea.

The chilling sea breeze slips into the gaps of my coat and muffler, stabs my burning face, reminding it of stiffness.

The cold continues to linger, yet sweat continues to drop. Removing the scarf wrapped up on my neck only makes me feel that a part of my body is being bound.

Whatever was stuck within my chest gets exhaled out as I struggle to regain my breath.

Despite my anxiousness, as if something is grabbing onto my hair, my footsteps start to slow down.

Being lucky enough to run into a red light, I take a deep breath as my hands rest on my ankles.

Running to escape something, being followed up at the moment I stopped.

The meaning behind that tear, the weight within those words, they are all questioning, they are all criticizing.

Reassuring me that I was wrong.

In front of my glaring eyes stands an old traffic light that refuses to be replaced.

Its blackened bloody red that screams of illness suddenly disappears.

Time to start running again.

Releasing a sigh that sounded so similar to a shriek, I straighten up my body and start stepping.

Towards that deep, dark green light that signals us to move forward.

1-2

As I reached school and entered the campus, my thoughts started to calm down to the point where those sad yet gentle words were echoing clearer than before.

From the moment I picked up the phone call till now, I have been thinking, running around in circles.

Words that have been said, words that could have been said.

What should've been shaped solid seemed as ambiguous as it had always been. What I have sealed up without a second thought, refusing to take a closer look at it.

If that is the case, what weight do my words even hold? Probably the only reason Hiratsuka-sensei purposely made me speak out is that this is the last time I have a chance to do so.

Sensing that the time of parting was approaching, I looked up at the twilight that filled up the entire sky.

Reaching the doorstep of the staff room, my hand that was about to knock on the door suddenly held back.

Tensing at the fear I'm feeling right now, I let out a sigh.

But I can't stand here forever.

Because she won't either.

Hiratsuka-sensei will one day leave us.

I never knew that. Thus I never tried to prove anything, to show her any results.

But the one thing I can do is to not show her this embarrassing side of me, that is the one thing I shouldn’t do.

After another sigh, I knocked twice on the door before entering the staff room.

My eyes swayed naturally towards that one position I have always looked at.

In that place sat Hiratsuka-sensei.

She seemed to be working on documentation.

That familiar figure worked relentlessly facing her desk, her long hair swaying from time to time, the slight rotation of her shoulders seemed like her trying to relax them.

The back view of her working seriously felt refreshing, and staring at it wasn’t boring. I didn't feel like bothering her at this moment, thus I didn't call out to her immediately.

Actually, there are some lies, many lies within this thought of mine.

I refused to witness the end of this never-ending daily life, which is why I didn't call out to her.

Losing someone also means that the scenery, the moments that I've always taken for granted will leave me too, something that took me so long to realize.

Hoping to take a closer look, I carefully moved towards her, trying not to make a single sound, while trying to recall how I've always started our conversation.

But she spoke right before me:

"Sorry, give me a few more minutes."

As if she already knew of my presence without making sure, Hiratsuka-sensei pointed at the deeper parts of the staff room, the spot where we always had our conversations.

Her tone sounded like how it had always been, so I replied briefly:

"Alright."

"Mhm."

With her head still facing the desk, she put a halt to our small talk.

As I moved towards the discussion room, the lingering smell of cigarette smoke reminded me that, the first time I came here for the keys of the clubroom, I also had a talk with Hiratsuka-sensei here. I recalled the weird expression she gave when she asked me to stay for another while, perhaps she felt lonely during that time.

At that time I didn't know that she was going to be shifted away.

I've been living a life where I've never been close to any teachers.

So this is probably the first time that I have to witness a teacher I truly appreciate about to leave right in front of me.

Sitting in the conversation room didn't feel reassuring, not being to see what Hiratsuka-sensei was doing. The curtains that divide this room from the others gave off a sense of dead silence, chipping my patience away bit by bit.

The brief noises made by the janitor and the ringing of phones reminded me of the flow of time. The skies outside were turning dark too.

After staring outside the window for some time, I heard a knocking sound on the wall. When I looked around, Hiratsuka-sensei was already standing in the room.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"Ah, it's fine…"

Her smile seemed so weak that it was giving off a sense of loneliness, making me unable to joke or grunt about all the waiting.

Her presence acted as a block of solid air that filled up the discussion area, the rumbling noise from the staff room suddenly felt nonexistent, as if she created an isolated space for us alone.

Only the sounds of leather could be heard as she sat on the sofa in front of me.

"So, where do we start from…"

Hiratsuka-sensei didn't continue speaking, instead, she placed a can of that familiar, sugar-saturated coffee on the table, and pushed it gently towards me.

I didn’t feel thirsty, so I shook my head. She handed over the black coffee on her other hand.

Guess I don't have a choice, so I chose the coffee I'm familiar with.

Holding the coffee in my hands, I silently waited for Hiratsuka-sensei to say something.

But I was instead replied with the regular tempo of knocking sounds.

Hiratsuka-sensei took out a cigarette, hitting its tip on the table. I recall that this was done to sort out the tobacco in it, but now it seemed like she was trying to sort out something else.

She then lit up the cigarette. The laminar flow of smoke started to waver in turbulence as it went up, filling the surroundings with the fragrance of tar.

I don't live in an environment with a lot of smokers. So I guess this fragrance will eventually vanish. And someday when I smell tar, I'll remember her, until someday when she completely fades from my memories.

To conceal this sudden thought that I had, I started to talk:

"For now, let’s talk about the prom…"

I ran all the way back here to know more about this, yet I made myself sound like I have something else to say.

Hiratsuka-sensei seemed to realize this but still nodded her head in agreement.

"Sure…"

She applied more force onto the still long cigarette until it was put off, made a short sigh and continued.

"From what I'm seeing right now, the school is currently reviewing towards the direction of canceling the graduation prom."

"Reviewing, huh."

"Yes, they haven't come to a final decision, but it’s expected that the school won't change its attitude towards the matter, which is why they'll most probably request its organizers to exercise self-restraint."

As Hiratsuka-sensei narrates this inevitable truth with her calm and composed tone, I intercepted:

"I'm assuming that 'self-restraint' was simply a statement, but what it really meant was to cancel the event?"

"Both the school and the board are taking on a subtle position. It was the school that approved the prom in the first place, so they can't just call it off. Which is why they compromised by giving the order of self-restraint."

"But didn't we…"

Hiratsuka-sensei was making a bitter expression. Which reminds me that she most probably has already discussed this matter with Yukinoshita and the others. Revolving around the same issue won't get us anywhere, so I decided to ask something different.

"But your opinion is different from what the school thinks, isn't it?"

"Yes, I believe that we can achieve a common ground through further discussions with the related parties, but…"

Hiratsuka-sensei didn't continue, but I'm able to guess what's the determining factor to the current situation.

The promotional video of the graduation prom that sparked uncertainties within the hearts of the parents, Yukinoshita's mother, who represented the parental board a few days ago, and their concerns that stemmed from the various issues of graduation proms in foreign countries.

These factors combined are enough for the school to decide on canceling the prom.

"…Well, from the fact that she came all the way here just to express their opinions, it’s not really surprising that things are how they are right now."

"Indeed. The situation has grown beyond my level of responsibility and authority, and my opinions can only be treated as the school's reference. *Sigh*, the sadness of being a lowly civil servant."

It’s just as she said. Not just the teachers, even graduating students like me and everyone else in the lower hierarchy of the system. None of our opinions will be taken seriously by the school authorities.

Forcefully achieving an equilibrium between each of the parties involved, having the weaker side put down their weapons, and expecting things to conclude without creating a huge storm.

'Self-restraint' is indeed an appropriate term to use.

"Having a job is the worst, after all."

"Not if you're working at the top, you have the freedom to do anything you want."

We joked over the matter with dead smiles. But these jokes aren't wrong either. At the end of the day, we're just puppets being played by the will of those with authority.

On this matter, Yukinoshita's mother is the one who holds the authority, a shadow ruler who has the school within her clutches.

For such a figure to purposely come over and request for a discussion with the school's administration.

How trivial the topic doesn't matter, just by seeing Mrs. Yukinoshita show such concern is enough to make everyone treat the matter in a superficial way.

Her true intentions are irrelevant, as what the others observed is merely the nature of the act.

Even if Mrs. Yukinoshita only came here 'to discuss' and 'to inquire', for a person with such a status to be here is enough for others to feel pressured, and enough to create an atmosphere for people to wonder.

For example, when two important figures have a pleasant tea break together, outsiders will feel suspicious towards the context of their chat within the private room, ending up with the formation of such an atmosphere where people will try to please the said important figures as much as possible.

This occurs in our daily lives too, the cliched "please try to read the atmosphere oh god" dialogue is one of its products, where they speculate over unclear, ambiguous info, and treat such an act as a virtue.

It’s an unenlightened method of adjusting things, yet it tends to create peace. Within schools, neighborhoods, workplaces, and, to an extent, even within social groups, being able to adhere to these unspoken rules is a necessary communication skill.

But then again, isn't reading the atmosphere too much of a forceful demand? Expecting the man to always be the one to take the initiative to ask for one's contact method or to invite someone out, and this magical rule where the third date will be sufficient to create an atmosphere suitable for confessing. What is this down triangle spam [1] lookalike ? It just counters Zangief so much, it's kinda unfair? Even if it's not used against Zangief its still goddamn strong!

The same communication skill applies even in most friend circles. When one of them started saying stuff like: "Isn't that person acting a little strange lately?" "He wasn't such a dick before." , then everyone suddenly thinks so hard like they're Habu Yoshiharu playing mind games in his shogi match [2]. And boom, the center of discussion suddenly got isolated without even realizing it.

In such an unfair shogi battle matchup, if you can't figure a way to get a 14 hand to escape, even Hokkaido chicken fritters [3] will end up becoming roasted chicken [4].

Since every group have a set of their own rules, one has to carefully observe these signals, go along the flow, and get used to these rules. Or

you'll end up like me, one has who failed to adjust to these rules, kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, high school, cram school, workplace, getting isolated in all these places. Ah, I'm truly the Eternal Seven Loner [5] , oh hey I'll most probably get an eight consecutive champion in college too, yay!

Life is truly a big game of shogi.

Thanks to being constantly judged over my inability to read the atmosphere, even if I can't read it, I'm still aware of its importance.

Which is why I can't say much about the school's judgment. One can label such an act as 'bureaucratic collusion', but if I were put in the same position as the school's authorities, I'd probably make the exact same decision. It's just too much of a pain to fight against the atmosphere.

"So that's how it is, huh…"

I said this with a convinced yet dejected voice, as I unconsciously looked towards the ceiling above. Is it because I'm showing a defeated face? Hiratsuka-sensei pushed the can of coffee, that I had yet to take a single sip of, closer to me. I nodded gently to express my gratitude.

I started reorganizing my thoughts while pulling the can opener.

For now, it seems impossible to overturn the school's decision.

A problem wouldn't exist as long as we didn’t view it as one. But when the existence of a problem is established, it’s also a wiser choice to not try smashing a rock using an egg if we're trying to solve the problem efficiently.

It’s clear that the prom is currently facing a life or death situation.

For the time being, only the student council, a small group of parents, and the school are aware of the self-restraint order. If the news starts to spread among the students and the rest of the parents, the opposition will gain more momentum as more individuals join in the mob.

Staying out of this will only make the situation harder, but there are no effective methods to solve it either.

"Isn't this already a checkmate…?"

I followed up this statement with a weak laugh.

At that moment, my eyes fell in line with Hiratsuka-sensei's. Her eyes were giving off a slightly warm sensation, as if she has been silently waiting for my reaction, benching her elbows onto her knees, uncrossing her fingers:

"As expected, you still want to make the prom a reality," she said at a speed slower than usual.

Remembering her question during the phone call, suddenly I'm at a loss for words.

Hiratsuka-sensei's tone sounded really soft, with no intention to reprimand me at all. However, I still couldn't bring up a proper answer, as I still had second thoughts on whether it is right to be further involved with the graduation prom. That reckless remark I made during the phone call made me feel a little ashamed too. But what's done is done, and it's pointless to try and deny my words.

Thus, I nodded my head once as if it was simply responding to gravity. It probably looked more like I was feeling down.

"I don't know if this is correct…"

Words without a proper direction wriggled out of my indecisive mouth. That one term that flashed through my mind made it sound even weaker.

'Codependency'.

Yukinoshita Haruno's definition of our relationship felt completely true, and I can't find any solid proof to defend against that statement.

My voice slowly faded out and my gaze slowly moved down.

As I blankly stared at the aged cracks on the floor, Hiratsuka-sensei switched up the position of her crossed legs.

"Well yes, Yukinoshita doesn't want you to interfere after all."

As I looked up at Hiratsuka-sensei, her eyes were filled with complete seriousness.

I recalled that moment where Yukinoshita told me not to get further involved. Hiratsuka-sensei was there too when she was doing that monologue. Which is why Hiratsuka-sensei was telling me this. Now that I think of it, Yukinoshita also didn't want me to know that the prom was going to be canceled. I have an idea of what she's thinking, but perhaps Hiratsuka-sensei knows more about the reason Yukinoshita is hiding it from me.

Being unsure of whether I'm able to be involved without getting noticed, I reacted towards the question with a slight smile.

The tight sensation on my rarely used facial muscles tells me that I'm probably making a really bitter smile.

To be honest, there's no doubt that things will only get more and more troublesome, just imagining all the directionless talk I'll have with her is making me feel depressed, and whatever conclusion that awaits us won't be anything good either. Even so, I have decided that I can't leave this situation alone. Thus I continued to smile.

Looking at this fake smile I was holding up, Hiratsuka-sensei's eyes slowly became gentle, a slight curve showed up on her lips.

"…It’s your move, then."

"Well yeah, it’s not my first day not being expected of anything."

Making unnecessary actions as I’ve always done, the bad habit that I can't seem to get rid of immediately.

Hearing that, Hiratsuka-sensei blinked a few times as if she was in shock, and then started to laugh uncontrollably while covering her mouth.

She was laughing a little too delightfully that I had to raise my eyebrows as a protest, Hiratsuka-sensei then made a soft cough to hold in her smile.

"Ahaha, sorry… I just felt very happy, you know."

Her expression then turned slightly worried.

"But Yukinoshita is trying really hard to change something. I'm personally rooting for her, so…I can't say that helping her without proper thought is a good idea. As it might turn up to be an obstruction to her growth. Especially when there's too much to think of where we're at now."

Her gaze slowly turned towards me, her struggling expression speaking for her concern towards Yukinoshita.

"You know, whatever codependency is… Doesn't it sound like an overstatement? More accurately, it feels like a misunderstanding more than anything."

"Well, yes… I don't believe that this is codependency, but what's more important is what viewpoint you decide to take. If your feelings are biased towards it, then no words will clear that up for you."

"…Right…"

I have experienced such stubbornness. More accurately, I once clung on to such stubbornness.

No matter how I console myself, it’s still not easy to give up this life that is as entangled and blurred like cotton candy. Thousands of carefully fabricated words aren't enough to cover up this monster of self-consciousness within me. Which is why now, that monster of self-consciousness still lurks within me, staring at me from behind.

This made me realize that one can't simply brush off how they view themselves. I believe that it’s the same for Yukinoshita. Codependency, no matter if it is the truth or not, at least Yukinoshita has bound herself to believe in such an idea. No matter how hard we try to deny it, she probably won't believe in us.

"Haruno isn't completely wrong either. For Yukinoshita, this is an important trial that she has to overcome."

"A trial huh…"

I repeated this term that I rarely hear of, to which Hiratsuka-sensei nodded in confirmation.

"Well, you can say that this is a ceremony too."

She then lit up another cigarette, took a deeper breath from it, and exhaled out a slow thread of smoke.

"Do you find it ridiculous?"

"No, not really…" I replied while shaking my head, "this situation does seem to happen sometimes".

"Well yes, things like this happen all the time. From getting the results for your music or manga entry to competing in a sports event, participating in the auditions of a singing contest, taking an exam or starting your career, even getting…that before your thirties is no different. There will always be that one period where you'll have to face yourself honestly."

Her gaze that landed somewhere far outside the window and her bittersweet tone made it sound like she was reminiscing on her own past.

"Has this ever occurred to…you before?"

"Yes, of course."

Hiratsuka-sensei answered me with a gentle smile and took another drag of the cigarette. As she released a short puff of smoke, her irises dilated as if some of the smoke has diffused deep into her lungs.

"There were a lot of things that I wanted to do in the past. There are also a lot of things that I can't do, and things I didn't want to do. A series of making choices, attempting, failing, giving up, and making a new choice. A cycle of events that never stops…even till now."

Her words swayed lonely in the air along with the smoke.

I have no idea what kind of past she has experienced to speak of such things, but they're proof that the Hiratsuka-sensei, this refined woman

sitting in front of me, is a product of the numerous attempts and challenges she has faced.

We have always sought definitive proof that we can survive by ourselves by gaining confidence, by building results. There won't be anyone who is willing to guarantee that for us. Even if there's a guarantee, it will only be meaningless if we refuse to believe in these guarantees. Which is why we have such desires to prove ourselves.

'Is it really correct to interfere with Yukinoshita's decision and resolve?' I recalled this question that Yukinoshita Haruno asked me not long ago.

To choose, to challenge, to win or lose, these are things that she alone has to face. Will she allow anyone else to be involved in it? What kind of identity and relationship I must have with her to be able to intervene? I have yet to find any answers.

Hiratsuka-sensei tapped on the cigarette a few times to clean off the tobacco ash and stared at me behind a veil of white smoke.

"Let me ask you this one more time, how do you plan to talk to her, really?"

She asked about a major issue that I was hesitating with.

She is certainly looking for my confirmation one last time.

I started to think carefully about what to say next, as at this moment I couldn’t continue to make any more lies.

"…I don't think that not communicating with her is an option."

The answer I gave during the phone call has not changed.

And I won't repeat it a second time, my thoughts and determination are not frivolous.

There's no need for consideration either, I have already made a choice, and the conclusion has always been there.

Yukinoshita's will has nothing to do with how I should act.

Just as it has always been, I do not know any other methods available. The option I can take has only been that one single option. Attempting any other approach has never gone well for me. The more I try to avoid making mistakes, the further I stray away from the right path.

Which is why I'll use the only method that I have.

In reply to Hiratsuka-sensei's serious, intimidating glance, I looked back at her with my dead, rotten eyes, refusing to avert my line of view.

Hiratsuka-sensei then made a satisfied smile.

"I see."

She gently smiled with her eyes closed. The way she nodded in approval made me unsure of how to react.

As I felt the pressure slowly turning into a gentle sensation, I ended up loosening my mind to the point of saying unnecessary things:

"Wait, 'I see'? That's it? "

"Yes, that shall suffice. I have faith in you, Hikigaya."

Said Hiratsuka-sensei without any hesitation.

"Uhm, thanks."

To hear her say this in such a direct way that felt like she's stating a simple fact, I can't even find myself to feel shy about it. I thanked her in a low voice as I nodded down in order to hide my heating cheeks.

But it seems that I didn't hide it properly, as I heard her giggling.

"Listen up Hikigaya, just helping out with the prom won't be enough to help her. You'll have to take proper measures in what methods you use. You already knew this, didn't you?"

I nodded.

She definitely won't accept my offer to help if I don't think of the appropriate words to use.

Just making the prom happen won't be enough either. To present Yukinoshita's ability as an individual, to help her become independent is something that needs to be worked on too.

Like the old saying of how teaching someone to fish is better than giving them fish. It’s better for Yukinoshita to save herself, but I have yet to find a way to achieve all of these objectives.

It took me a while to realize that I've been scratching my head the whole time.

"It’s definitely harder than it seemed to be…"

"Yes, it’s hard alright… Especially for your kind of situation."

Hiratsuka-sensei took another mouthful of cigarette smoke and blew out streams of smoke from both edges of her mouth.

"I know right? Our relationship only started because one of us needed help from others. And now our wills seem to be clashing with their polar opposites."

I then crossed my fingers to form an X shape.

Hiratsuka-sensei shrugged speechlessly and asked: "Really now. How do you think you guys managed to pull it through before this?"

"How did we make it through, huh…"

I actually had no idea, all I can remember is me doing things that hardly mattered in the end.

Looking at my confused expression, Hiratsuka-sensei clenched her fists, walked towards me and started doing air punches. P-please don't do that. She's gonna punch me really hard and then treat me very nicely, make me fall for her from the treatment contrast, the perfect script to create a masochist, oh god…

She made a victorious smile upon seeing my frightened face.

"When the ideals of two heroes of justice start to clash, neither of them will surrender without a fight."

Her line made me feel nostalgic, even if I had forgotten the first time I heard it.

"Oh… This brings back memories."

"I know, right?"

Hiratsuka-sensei replied in a joking tone.

But her smile only lasted for an instant.

The sides of her mouth were still curving up, but her lonesome eyes started looking into the realm of nothingness.

"This really…brings back a lot of memories…"

This dialogue that seemed to come out without her realizing it was not meant for me, but her speaking to herself.

While I let Hiratsuka-sensei have her own moment, I turned my neck left and right to relax my head a bit. Even if we both felt nostalgic, her current feelings were contextually different from mine, so I kept quiet.

The silence, however, didn't last long, as Hiratsuka-sensei continued speaking:

"It's not the first day you two have different opinions, isn't it? But you all managed to overcome such situations, so my suggestion to you is to have faith in what you have gained from those past experiences."

"Yeah… I'll try." I replied with a gentle smile.

She does not wish to be assisted, but I can't avoid communicating with her either. Which is why a new way of communication has to be sought. Reviewing my past experiences gave me a vague yet solid answer.

Seeing me nodding in enlightenment, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled in satisfaction:

"Now that you came up with a clearer guideline, I think it's time to go meet up with her. Yukinoshita should still be in the Student Council room right now, go."

"Yes, I'll be leaving th… Wait, one last thing I wanted to ask you."

As I was about to stand up, I remembered something that I was curious about since the beginning of the conversation.

"Hmm?"

Hiratsuka-sensei tilted her head and made a childish smile that hardly fits her current age. The expression I was having right now seemed more sinister in comparison:

"So at the end of the day, the prom's organizers only need to exercise self-restraint, right?"

"…I was asked the same question not long ago."

The way Hiratsuka-sensei said it tells me that Yukinoshita and the others have no intent to give up on the graduation prom. In fact, they already came to this conclusion before me.

Hiratsuka-sensei closed her eyes, and then let out a deep sigh as if she gave up struggling. She took another mouthful of smoke, and then released it as she looked towards a distant place within the scenery outside.

I know that her actions indicate that she has acquiesced with our ideas. While I felt grateful to Hiratsuka-sensei, it also left me worried about the consequences.

"But if we continued doing this, wouldn't it put you in a very risky situation?"

If unwanted events occur during the process, she'll have to take full responsibility for our mess. I'm not sure what kind of punishment the school authorities will impose onto her, but she'll definitely end up being judged by both concerned and unconcerned parties. Lynches that go with the name of social justice are pretty common after all.

But Hiratsuka-sensei simply shrugged, and said with a playful tone:

"By the time anything happens I won't be around anyway, I don't care about what happens after I'm gone."

"Ahaha, said like a typical modern youngster."

"Of course, I am a modern youngster after all."

In protest to my comment, she tapped on the table as she adjusted her tone to sound like a youngster. Her joke made me start to laugh out of control.

"Even if things do come down to the worst, I'm only gonna lose my job. It’s no big deal, just do whatever you want."

Hiratsuka-sensei continued to joke around, tapping her throat with a hand knife.

"Eh… Nah I can't just do that…"

Don't just bet your career over it. That pressures me so hard that my lifespan is shortening like a mad girl.

"Don't mind me, it’s just a joke. My wits are stronger than you think. If I really lose my job, I'm just gonna get married. If I find one who's willing to, that is."

Her fingers slid across her hair, as she started to laugh ironically.

I couldn’t get myself to laugh over this matter, yet I ended up laughing softly and said:

"You'll be fine."

"What, you plan to marry me someday?"

Hiratsuka-sensei reacted almost instantaneously with a shocked face. Wait what no? She's too precious for me to own! So someone please, before I change my mind, please marry her now!

As I was thinking on how to reply to her, she stared at me with her big round eyes like an abandoned Labrador. Ah, large canines are just so

cute…but wait, I already have a cat at my house. So I shook my head in embarrassment.

"Actually, I don't have plans to deal with the situation using any chaotic methods…I think."

I said it without sounding too confident.

We're in a really unfavorable situation. Trying to achieve a mutual agreement with Yukinoshita is going to be a challenge too.

But even if I'm aware that we haven't obtained the win condition, I still have to sound optimistic, or else Doraemon can't go back to the future in peace…

I tried to smile as much as possible to cover up my facade. And so, Hiratsuka-sensei stared at me silently.

"…So reliable."

Like a person watching a car leaving into the distance, she closed her eyes slowly and said it in a gentle voice.

Hearing that made me blush for a moment, without realizing it, I turned my head away while touching my hair.

I said some big words that hardly suit someone of my identity.

Being aware that I should also make sure that my methods won't cause Hiratsuka-sensei to be affected by its consequences, the difficulty of the situation seemed to have increased a little more than the hard mode it already was.

Even so, this made me see a glimpse of light in the situation.

If the process is handled properly, there won't be any situation where Hiratsuka-sensei will have to take responsibility for us. Well yeah, probably, there better not be.

Sigh, but then again I should really prepare myself to explain to my parents on why I would marry a woman who's about ten years older than me.

Anyway, my course of action has been decided. Since there's nothing more for us to speak of, both of us remained silent.

After a few seconds of silence, I swallowed down the rest of the sweet coffee and stood up, getting ready to leave. I picked up my school bag and coat that were put aside, leaving everything else in the room.

"I'm going."

"Mhm."

I made a short goodbye, which she replied with a nod.

Our chat had now come to an end, on the timing that I thought was most appropriate.

But just as I was about to walk out of the room, I heard her voice coming from behind:

"Hikigaya."

I did not look back, but I didn't plan on ignoring her call either, so I halted.

"I'm sorry…that I can't bring myself to say it."

I was unable to see Hiratsuka-sensei's expression at this moment, yet it was not hard to imagine the way she was looking onto the floor sadly, because it was the same expression I was making right now.

As I tried to say something, the bitterness of the coffee that should've been completely swallowed rose back up, and my throat was blocked by the strong scent of condensed milk.

I reacted by forcing the coffee back into my stomach, along with the words that I wanted to say.

"*Cough*… No, you don't have to apologize."

Turned my head over my shoulder, and with the properly prepared smiling face, I continued saying:

"There's nothing that we can do about that, that's just how jobs work. I understand that your position doesn't allow you to talk about it. And it’s not like your transfer has been decided yet, right?"

I tried to say it in the most fluent and natural way possible. But Hikigaya Hachiman was never a bright, cheerful person to begin with, which made it sound blank and insincere instead.

Hiratsuka-sensei acted as if she wasn’t bothered by it, and continued to say while looking down.

"Well yeah, the official dismissal letter hasn't been given yet."

To not speak about things that haven't been officially announced. This is a rule that comes along with the job position.

Deep down, we're both aware that this is merely an excuse. Yet this is an actual existing rule that must not be broken.

Which is why we decided to accept and compromise. No malicious or virtuous will exists behind her decision, she is simply complying with the rules. Because we're aware of such a rule, there is nothing that we can do about it, except to accept it with a smile.

"But it’s gonna be really embarrassing if I don't have to leave in the end. Ahahaha…"

Said Hiratsuka-sensei as she followed with a laugh while stroking her hair.

"Isn't that so? Hahaha…"

I laughed too and started to feel a little more relaxed.

But that couldn't make the emptiness leave me.

I am well aware of it.

Making jokes won't change anything. In fact, the act of joking itself will eventually turn stale, and verbal conversation can only serve to disguise ourselves.

But all things will come to an end eventually.

Our conversation had come to an end too.

"I'm going, then."

"Yes, do your best."

I made a slight bow, as I walked out of the room, the flickering sounds of a flame being lit up could be heard from behind.

Along with a short sigh.

Hiratsuka-sensei will be working in the staff room for another while, I guess.

I then closed the door to the staff room.

Chapter 2: No matter what, Isshiki Iroha wants to confirm something

The windows were dyed with the colors of the sunset.

A dark blue presence slowly stretched itself from beyond the sky, the flickering road lamps illuminating the path for the leaving students.

Even though the amount of daylight had grown slightly, the night still seems to have fallen rather early. The total silence from the soccer field, where most sports clubs operate on, tells me that the school gates will soon close.

I didn't spend that much time in the staff room, but it was enough to change the scenery within the campus. As if we have lost our sense of time within that small isolated space.

Within that tiny gap of time where I looked away from the windows, things continued to change.

Even now, as I walk on this short path that leads me from the staff room to the student council room, new circumstances might have arisen without me realizing it.

Being aware of the changes that could happen any minute, I made haste in my footsteps.

This passageway with no presence of anyone other than myself is filled up by the sunset's afterglow.

In comparison to the lighting in the special block or the new school building, the transparent windows in this corridor, being the only light source, gives off a more chilling sensation. While during winter things would look much colder.

The sounds of footsteps echoed within the chilly air.

Not the lively flapping kind of footsteps, nor the bold heavy kind of footsteps, but mushy sounds of footsteps that gave off a sense of wetness.

As I'm in a hurry, I walk in an awkward way, where I can feel one of my shoes stepping on the heels of the other at times.

But I can't stop just yet.

Not stopping is already a big improvement by itself.

My body felt lighter after the talk with Hiratsuka-sensei.

I now have a clear image of the things that I want to do, the things that I wish to own.

Ignore anything unnecessary, throw away the questions accumulated in my mind, stop thinking about those concerns that loomed in my heart.

Leave everything else behind, keep only the mission, and work on it like a robot.

As long as this can be solved, it’s fine to shove everything else aside. What I must do now is to look for any option that I could use.

As I kept walking, I reached the very end of the afterglow in the passageway.

The seemingly continuous flow of windows was replaced by the walls that linked to the student council room.

The door to the student council room was closed shut, and no voices were heard from the other side, making my own breathing the only sound audible to me. I took some time to regulate my breath in order to calm myself down.

It had been a few days since I last met with Yukinoshita and Iroha, when Yukinoshita's mother came over to the school to request the cancellation of the prom. Our last conversation was a refusal that hardly counted as a proper talk.

Which is why staying calm and composed is crucial to what happens next. If any of us have our feelings take over, it will be impossible for us to reach a common ground.

Alright, this shouldn't be that big of a problem, after all my emotions have died off to the point that they have reached a negative value! But wait, isn't that worse?

Can I do it? Can I do it? *Ba-dump, ba-dump*...Don’t worry, don’t worry! You can do it, you can do it! Do your best! Do your best!♡

This extremely out of character encouragement I gave myself had a surprisingly uplifting effect on my mood. Thus I took advantage of this change and knocked on the door.

"Coming~"

Iroha's voice and the sound of approaching footsteps could be heard.

The door soon opened up, as I looked into the door seam her flaxen brown colored hair could be seen swaying around, along with her long woolen sweater that shone under the sunset.

Isshiki Iroha's head then popped out from the half-opened door, and as soon as she saw me, her expression turned from her originally cute

curious face into a face that spelled *oh crap*…

"…Ah."

Iroha made a soft sigh, took a glance behind her, and walked out of the student council room cautiously, closing the door immediately as she stepped out. She looked at me with an awkward expression:

"So you came after all… Ahaha."

"Yeah, is Yukinoshita in there?"

Iroha looked back at the student council room as she heard my question, implying that Yukinoshita is indeed in the room. I then let out a sigh of relief and nervousness.

I grabbed my pockets to wipe off the sweat on my palm, then moved forward, reaching out my arm towards the doorknob.

As I was about to reach it, Iroha moved left to block my arm. What's this? A crab game? Guess the Obamasgone meme even got to the masses huh. I then sent out my left hand, to which Iroha reacted swiftly, blocking all possible paths to the doorknob. What's with this one on one defense situation, our national team really needs someone of your caliber on their defensive line…

"Uhm… You're blocking the way… Can you uh, move aside please?"

Iroha answered by completely sticking her back onto the doorknob, then crossed her arms, stared at me and said:

"Before that, may I know the exact reason why you are here? Unrelated personnel are prohibited in this room, you know."

Iroha wagged her finger while saying this with a stern face. Huh, a never before seen expression from her. Thanks to the special treatment from both the ex and present student council presidents, I've always entered this room without asking permission, but it is a rule that unrelated personnel are prohibited from the student council room. And now that this rule has been brought up against me, I can't do anything about it.

Sigh, for a girl of Iroha's personality this is just so annoying. But then again…the way she put one hand on her waist while wagging her finger on the other looks so cute. Not to mention that she's pouting too.

But in contrast to her cute expression, from how she refused to move away from the door, I sense a strong will that won't yield unless I convince her properly. So I'll have to be honest with Iroha or she won't budge.

"…I'm here to help."

"You can't ♡ "

"Eh……"

Iroha then moved closer to me and laid out her arms horizontally, as if she was blocking me while asserting her dominance.

But she seemed to realize that I had no intention of leaving either. Probably knowing this situation would probably last very long without either of us giving up, Iroha then asked:

"So… You already know about the prom's current situation?"

"Yes."

As she heard my answer, Iroha then knocked on her head with a troubled face. After a few moments of silence, she looked back at the room again. She then took a few steps away from the room, while signaling me to follow her. It seems that she doesn't want our conversation to be overheard by Yukinoshita.

Or I could just ignore her and go straight into the room instead.

As I sneaked bit by bit towards the door, Iroha, who already expected me to do so, grabbed onto my cuffs and dragged me far far away from the room.

Since I couldn't just shake off her small hands, I had no choice but to follow Iroha's lead. After walking a distance in the corridor, we took a

turn and stopped at the open corridor that links the main school building to the special block.

A long bench was placed at the wall of this air corridor. Students tend to gather around here in between classes, but now that it’s this late, there’s nothing but the chilly air that fills the atmosphere and the dim light from the sunset.

After walking to the bench, Iroha finally let go of me. I rubbed on the cuff of my sleeve to make sure that there were no wrinkles. A lingering warmth could be felt as I touched it, which made my cheeks tickle a little. Geez, don't just hold onto my sleeves all of a sudden, it makes me feel shy you know.

"Senpai, I appreciate your intention to help, I personally feel happy about it too but…"

As Iroha made a pause while leaning her back onto the window, she awkwardly looked to the floor, along with those long eyelashes of hers.

"But I can't let you in just yet. More specifically, I can't let you meet her."

"Why?"

I asked while sitting down on the bench. Iroha lowered her hands and put them behind her, sticking them onto the windows.

"To be honest, I was thinking that things would get more troublesome if senpai came over immediately, so maybe it would be better if you could come over a bit later."

"Well… Yes, maybe you're right."

It’s not hard to figure out where she is coming from since Iroha was there when we had that argument. It makes sense for her to be worried, especially after witnessing such a pointless dispute. I felt anxious about meeting up with Yukinoshita too. But even so, I can't just take a step backward.

"…It’s fine, I plan to speak to her properly."

"’ I plan to speak to her properly ’… Eh~, you sure about that, Senpai?"

She stared at me in a very doubtful way… The edges of her lips were twisting as if she was making a 'ngyeh' sound, her eyebrows looked tightly wrinkled too. What's with this level of disbelief… Her expression made me feel uneasy, so I slowly averted my eyes, and made a soft cough.

"It’s true, it’s true, all right? I did make a proper plan on how to start the conversation."

Bringing up codependency will only stress us out. So, for now, it’s better to avoid dealing with this matter and work on the other important issues. Our thoughts might differ, but we have the common topic of making the prom a success, and that should allow us to have a constructive discussion.

But man, why is Iroha still putting on that doubtful face…

"How to start the conversation, huh… Can't say that I trust Senpai on that."

"Yeah, sure sucks to have low credibility."

Being self-aware of my life decisions that hardly earned me any credibility, I shrugged lightly.

Iroha then stood silent for a moment as if she was trying to observe something, and let out a deep sigh. Guess she just felt speechless towards me.

"Senpai, you're being overprotective again."

As Iroha said so, she walked towards me, gripped onto the edges of her skirt, and gently sat beside me. She held onto her forehead, slightly lifting her chin. Her hair rustled lightly as it moved across her elbows, glimmering under the sunset. She started to gaze at somewhere beyond the windows in front of us.

"I'm sure that Yukinoshita-senpai is trying her best here. Not that I understand how she feels."

"…Well, she definitely is."

I laid my hands down behind me and stared at the ceiling above.

Perhaps Iroha's response is a better idea. When someone has the intent to complete something alone, for the others to take a step back and see things through is probably what's best for that person.

"Even so… You still plan to help her?"

Looking towards the direction of her voice, Iroha's hand continued to lay on her forehead, while slightly turning her head towards me as if she's observing my reaction. This motion felt pretty childish and very cute, but a chilling sense of seriousness lies within her eyes.

"…That is my intention."

While I can't trust my dead fish eyeballs to make me look serious at all, I tried to compensate by deepening my tone. Iroha stayed silent for a while, seemingly considering something, then asked me in a soft tone:

"Even if… Doing so wouldn't benefit Yukinoshita-senpai at all, you'll still offer your aid?"

"I never really acted out on the intent of benefitting anyone in the first place, so I'm just doing the usual here… Yeah."

"Doing the usual… Huh."

I nodded in reply as she muttered those words in a confused tone. Iroha then laid her head down, while I turned mine to look at the windows.

The outcomes have always been the same.

My words and actions have always ended up being far from the correct solution. An endless cycle of misunderstanding things and making mistakes. Even my apology didn't end well, like a row of buttons that continue to end up in the wrong hole of the shirt.

This had been repeating throughout the whole year, and before I realized it, winter was almost over. The strong winds that indicate the coming spring rattle the windows, breaking this short moment of silence.

"To be honest, I don't think that Yukinoshita-senpai will accept your offer."

"Indeed…"

I accidentally let out a deep sigh, Iroha then came closer and continued saying:

"In fact, you'll probably be cruelly rejected."

"That's probably the case…"

I sighed once again, Iroha moved even closer and stared at me:

"Even so, you still want to help?"

"Of course I'll help…"

Hearing my answer that was followed up by another sigh, Iroha opened her mouth wide while leaning her head to her right:

"Huh!? But why bruh?"

"Well for why I'm doing so…"

Is it really that shocking? She even stopped using honorifics at this point, not that it really matters… But did she forget what she said in the first place…

"Weren't you the one who asked for my help in the first place…"

As I spoke, Iroha froze for a moment, blinking her eyes a few times. Then took a quick step back and shook her hands while saying rapidly:

"Wha… What? Are you doing it for me?! What the hell do you have a crush on me or something even though I have always received your help even though you always treated me nicely and even though I don't dislike you there are too many things that need to be cleared up for now so lets put this off for another time sorry."

She quickly followed up with a deep bow. I responded by nodding my head in satisfaction.

"Ah yes, now that's what I'm looking for. It sounds different from the usual but whatever."

"What's with this comment...it's the same as usual, isn't it?"

Iroha muttered unhappily, she seems to have glared at me too. Yeah whatever, that's the reaction I expected… Taking distance from me as I laid down feeling exhausted, Iroha pointed at her cheeks with her index finger while saying with a poker face.

"I won't mind if you use me as an excuse, though."

"Bad excuse, and it's not the real reason after all…"

Iroha ignored my correction and continued poking her cheek, looking troubled.

"But to be fair, I doubt that would be the kind of reason Yukinoshita-senpai will accept either."

"Of course it's not… How did we loop back to this? But hey, at least our great Irohasu can help by saying a few good things throughout our conversation, no?"

"Eh… I don't want to… Also, it's impossible for me to do so."

"Impossible… Even answering that in an instant…"

Wait, did she seriously just say 'I don't want to'? As I looked towards her, wondering if I misheard Mada Mada for Yada Yada, Iroha made a soft cough, patted her chest for no reason, and said:

"Yes, a girl's decision cannot be easily changed. But if it's something decided by someone else, we can simply make amends to it, and if that decision is a pain we can act like we forgot it."

"You're the worst…"

Nonono, that's just you, isn't it? It's not a girl's exclusive thing but varies from one to another. The kind of equality where everyone can be All Might is something that a person without talent like me believes in.

As she turned back towards me, Iroha said with a worried face:

"And considering that it’s Yukinoshita-senpai we're dealing with here, it’s going to be hard, isn't it…"

"Of course, of course it would be…"

Not because it’s a girl's decision, but because it’s Yukinoshita's decision, a decision that I can't go against easily. Looking back at my experiences of interacting with her in the past year, it’s obvious that Yukinoshita’s honesty and seriousness won't allow her to take back her words that easily.

Shutting her eyes, crossing her arms, Iroha made a short groan and said:

"This time, I can feel that she has been caring for me a lot… so I feel like supporting her decision too."

She then stated her final stand with a bitter smile:

"Which is why I can't bring myself to help out in persuading her. I'm sorry Senpai."

I told her not to worry while making my best smile possible, to which she replied with a gentle nod. For my random idea of her saying some good things to Yukinoshita, she listened properly and even considered things thoroughly. I have to say, Isshiki Iroha really is a much more decent person than I thought she was. Which made me feel sorry for attempting to drag her into such a messy issue.

Yes, I should be the one to do the planning.

…Now then, how should I tell her exactly? I can't figure it out, she is truly a lot of trouble, that girl… But when it comes to being troublesome I'm the same as her, perhaps even more troublesome in comparison.

I started to rub on my forehead to get better blood flow around my brain. While I was doing so Iroha kept staring at me without making a sound.

"……"

"What is it?"

I asked as I noticed her gaze focusing on me, she shook her head and answered.

"Nothing really, I was just thinking about how persistent you are."

"Ah… well yes."

To hear such a direct comment, while being stared at by her, I found myself at a loss for words. Thus I could only reply in such a short, incomplete manner. Iroha slowly walked near me until reaching within an arm's distance, while continuing to look into my eyes.

"But why? Being rejected by Yukinoshita-senpai herself, and after hearing such words from Haruno-senpai. For what exact reason are you pushing yourself this much? When it comes to such a sticky situation one would simply stay away as far as possible, isn't that so?"

She phrased her question in a way that doesn't allow me a chance to answer. Even if I could, I doubt that I could come out with a proper answer.

Iroha steps closer every time she asks a question, while I move back to maintain our distance, to the point I could feel the back of my legs pressing themselves against the bench.

"There's a lot of reasons behind it…"

Realizing that there is no further space for me to move away, I could only avoid looking directly at her, but Iroha proceeded to grab onto my tie.

"Please answer me seriously, Senpai."

Iroha forcefully turned my head towards her, the obvious twist on my necktie tells me that she's applying a lot of strength to it.

I'm unable to look away, nor could I avert my line of sight from the image of Iroha's soft lips and glowing eyes. In front of her determined expression, I could only do my best to open my heavy mouth.

"I swear, there really are a lot of reasons behind it. It’s impossible to state each of them clearly just yet…"

"It’s fine even if you say it vaguely."

Iroha does not give any room for me to play around with words, removing all chances for me to remain silent.

But how exactly should I phrase it to make her understand better?

These painful feelings are not something that could be simply expressed through words, but what's more troublesome about them is that they could be described and be interpreted as anything within an acceptable range. Such a translucent, unclear, shapeless thing. To apply existing words to it will only slowly chip off from the sides to the point it reaches degradation, ending up as a total mistake.

More importantly, I could not accept the act of simplifying things into one single sentence.

Up until now, I've always relied on excuses like bringing my sister into the picture or stating that I'm just doing my job. Even just now, I tried using Iroha's request as an excuse, something that she would usually get along with.

But what Iroha Isshiki wanted was not such dishonest words. Her eyes keep telling me that it doesn't need to come with a motive, it doesn't need a proper elaboration. It’s fine for me to make it unclear, it’s fine for me to say it vaguely.

'Show me your answer.'

"……I have a responsibility."

"Responsibility, huh."

Muttered Iroha in a low voice. She took a short breath and slightly inclined her head.

Did it sound too confusing to her? She lowered her head and seemingly thought for a while, then looked back up, signaling me to continue.

I nodded in reply and started assembling words in my head. Probably because Iroha is grabbing onto it, my slightly loose necktie now feels very tight. I find it hard to breathe, and my chest felt unusually hot.

"For things to have become so complicated, and for reaching such a state of codependency, it’s safe to say that I am responsible for causing all of this. Which is why I wanted to clean up my own mess. Not a decision to change things up, but simply how I have always done it. That's all that there is."

As I finally said my conclusion that sounded like an answer, Iroha's hand let go of my necktie and slipped down as it lost its strength.

"Ahaha… My bad, it sounded so different from what my expectations were that I spaced out a bit right there. Ah… Your necktie is completely messed up too, I'm really sorry."

"Ah, it’s fine, it was kinda twisted before you grabbed on it anyway…"

Even after hearing that, Iroha seemed to think that she shouldn't have done that, muttering words like ‘this looks bad’, while anxiously rubbing my necktie with her hands attempting to straighten it. She rubbed on it so hard, that my body wobbled along with her movements.

Her hands stopped abruptly.

"Those words that you said just now, can you properly say the same thing to Yukinoshita-senpai?"

Iroha's eyes are still focused on my necktie, making a weird expression that I can't identify.

I couldn't answer her in time, so Iroha pressed on my necktie again, urging me for an answer. Her flaxen brown started to rustle as if they're teasing me. Her cute expression that seemed like she was joking gave me peace of mind, which made me smile before I realized it.

"……I'll definitely say it, but the real question here is whether these words can reach her."

"Hmph, truly a troublesome bunch of senpais."

Iroha looked up with a speechless kind of smile, and then slapped on my necktie.

"For me, as long as the Service Club helps me out, then there will always be fewer things to worry about. So go for it, alright?"

Iroha swiftly stood up. After taking a few steps, she turned back at me and waved in a way that signaled me to follow her. Guess she finally allowed me to enter the student council room.

I lifted up my stiff body and walked towards her.

2-2

As I entered the student council room alongside Iroha, a fragrant scent could be smelled, which seems to be some kind of indoor perfume. Unlike the one we have in the Service Club room, it’s a more refreshingly sweet fruity smell, without the clear fragrance of tea within it.

The student council room isn't really big, and the stacked piles of items within the room a sign of its long history. In the center of all this mess is a small space that looks unusually tidy and clean.

Beside the poignantly designed chairman's table is placed a simple work desk, of which Yukinoshita is standing behind while looking at a whiteboard.

Considering that no other student council members are in here, Yukinoshita and Iroha probably stayed here by themselves to discuss and plan a new course of action. Words in red, blue and black could be seen on the whiteboard. As she noticed someone else entering, Yukinoshita turned her head around.

"Oh, Hikigaya-kun."

"’ Sup."

Yukinoshita acted naturally even after seeing me, showing a faint smile as if she wasn't affected emotionally by the self-restraining order.

"Isshiki-san, let’s have a short break, shall we?"

While saying that, she unlocked the fixating valve on the whiteboard, flipped the board around to show its other surface, and pushed it aside.

Yukinoshita proceeded to prepare tea. She turned on the electric kettle in the room and took out tea bags while waiting for the water to boil.

Looking at her doing these actions in a skillful manner, I suddenly felt reminiscent. As she noticed my gaze laying upon her, Yukinoshita

shifted her eyes, and stopped at a chair in front of her desk, signaling me to take a seat.

The popping sounds of water boiling can be heard as I pulled the chair to make space. Iroha then walked lively towards the chairman desk, sitting on a luxurious looking armchair. I mean that chair is cool looking and all, BUT CAN YOU DO THIS!? Only 399 by the way. (I'm doing my part Pewds)

Soon, Yukinoshita pushed over a cup that looked different from our usual tea set. As I thanked her, I held up the cup of tea, only to smell an unfamiliar scent.

"Have you heard about it?"

She asked an unspecified question, but the topic was obvious.

"Ah, yes. Since I was beside Yuigahama just now."

Yukinoshita seemed surprised for a second but quickly went back to her calm expression from before.

"…I see."

"I already talked to Hiratsuka-sensei to learn about the details. Is it fine on your side? I can help if there's anything that requires my assistance…"

As I was halfway through my sentence, Yukinoshita brought the paper cup to her mouth, took a light sip of tea to moisturize her mouth and answered:

"There is no need for that, as we're already working on the appropriate countermeasures."

Compared to the warmth from the cup of tea in my hands, our conversation seemed to have started in a cold, awkward tone. Being uneasy of such an atmosphere, Iroha made a few twists with her body while glancing towards me, telling me to "please say it nicely".

No, wait a second Iroha, for a conversation to work, stuff like directions, sequences, procedures and timing, even bravery are all relevant essentials, aren't they? Man, it just feels so difficult to make a proper conversation. Even now, my attempt to make a test of her intention to talk about this topic got shut down immediately.

Anyway, for the conversation to continue, an appropriate head start is required, which isn't really something I'm used to.

I made a few blows over my cup of tea, thinking on how I should start the conversation. Soon after the hot sensation started to fade away from the tea, reaching a temperature where my cat tongue can take it in, I took a sip of the tea and asked with a soft voice.

"So… What's your plan?"

Upon hearing my question, Yukinoshita looked into my eyes, as if she was trying to instigate something out of me.

"We're still reviewing our existing proposal. For now, there's nothing much to say about our plans."

Reviewing, huh… But considering all those words that I saw on the whiteboard just now, and Iroha glancing towards Yukinoshita with a weird look, it seems that the main direction they'll be taking has already been decided. But she didn't want to talk about it.

She even flipped the whiteboard around so that no one could see it, so perhaps forcing an answer is not the best course of action.

In that case, it's better to talk in a more roundabout way, since the conversation will continue to be derailed with my current method. I looked towards Iroha and asked.

"Is there anything to do right now?"

"…For now, nothing much."

Iroha looked away while answering, but she didn't look towards Yukinoshita either, so it's hard to say whether this was a lie or not.

But from the absence of the other student council committees and the lax atmosphere within this room, it does seem that the situation wasn't as urgent as it seemed to be. At least there's no specific action that has to be done immediately.

"So to put it in other words, right now is not a suitable time to execute immediate actions?"

"Of course. After all, we only received the self-restraint order today."

Yukinoshita replied to the conclusion that I muttered out accidentally, with the same calm tone. For someone who just received the notice not long ago, her words lack the sense of anxiety one would usually expect. Most probably she also has already noticed the other meaning behind 'exercise self-restraint', which is why she can remain her composure right now.

For the self-restraining order from the school's executives, Yukinoshita and I share a similar view on the school's intent. A common topic being the spice to inducing an active conversation, I can probably touch on this topic a little more.

I looked back at Yukinoshita.

"But there are countermeasures that can be designed based around that, isn't that so? After all, it is only a restraining order. In fact, straight out ignoring such an order is possible in cases of desperation."

The ones who gave out the restraining order are the school executives, specifically a concession they made towards Hiratsuka-sensei. To request for someone to exercise self-restraint, it also means handing over the right of action to its subject, a wording that could be portrayed in a way where its subject is allowed to make their decisions based on their own judgment. While its original intent is to request the prom organizers to cancel the event without them sounding to be forceful, Yukinoshita can intentionally misunderstand its meaning and complicate things further by using the debate where they're only asked to apply self-restraint, but the final decision still lies in the hands of the student council.

I said that with a bitter smile, being aware that Yukinoshita probably knows the situation better than I do.

To which Yukinoshita replied to without raising her eyebrows:

"If possible, I prefer not to take such a risk. While using the ambiguity of the term against them could work, simply showing them an unyielding attitude won't be enough."

"I am aware of that too, so we'll only use this to open up a platform for discussions."

Just as she said, to forcefully conduct the prom is merely a self-destructing tactic that will only work once. Such a reckless decision cannot be made if we still plan to organize the prom for the years to come.

Their current plan is to use their self-restraining status as their means to negotiate with the parents.

We might organize it without school supervision, we might set up the venue somewhere outside school grounds, we might do something that goes beyond your imaginable level of extremeness, are you still fine with it? Threatening them with such statements.

Even if the student council wouldn't actually do such things, it is an effective method to make the parents accept their request to negotiate.

It is the hard way to do things, but it will open up room for negotiation.

But what matters afterward is what material can they present during the negotiation.

I stood up and walked over to move the whiteboard. Yukinoshita sighed but did not attempt to stop me.

I pulled out the whiteboard and flipped it over.

As I expected, suggestions of the strategy they can take have been written on the whiteboard and other information that relates to the new direction the prom could take.

It seemed that they had quite a discussion, as traces of it were left on every corner of the board. There are two different kinds of handwriting

and writing style on the board, which seemingly belong to Yukinoshita and Iroha.

The sentences that mostly end with a question mark, but properly phrased and written horizontally, were probably written by Yukinoshita, while the clump of sentences that end with a large exclamation mark seems to belong to Iroha.

Judging from the order those sentences were arranged in, Yukinoshita and Iroha each came out with one suggestion at a time, and proceeded to comment on each other's suggestions in order to find out which idea is better and the possible improvements.

"So you two came up with these ideas?"

"More accurately, I question Yukinoshita-senpai's idea, while Yukinoshita-senpai refutes my suggestions."

"Is that so, then it’s quite the constructive discussion you had there."

Giving more than one suggestion is important when one reaches a stagnant situation. At least they're able to have more options, and both suggestions can compromise with each other. But being too fixated on denying each other won't make things progress either.

Only by forming an opposing situation could the discussion move forward. But merely pointing out whether the suggestions would work would only reach a 'yes or no' kind of conclusion.

So, exactly what kind of conclusion have they come to… Eh? Among all the written things, I can't seem to spot something that feels like a conclusion, it’s like reading through a note that only its owner can understand.

"…So, where's your conclusion?"

"Let’s see… The ones in the red circle."

As Iroha answered, I took another look at the whiteboard, there are indeed some spots that are circled in red.

Gorgeous, wholesome, dress code restriction, supporting guidelines, supervising officials, upload prohibited, OK!

That's all of them.

"Hmmm… I kinda understa… No wait wait wait, I don't understand what's going on here at all."

Like, what is this, a spot-the-word game? I felt like I can understand it, yet I can't at the same time… What am I looking at exactly?

I looked back, hoping for an explanation.

Yukinoshita then placed her finger on the cup's mouth, looking at the gently swinging waves on the surface of the tea.

"I was still sorting things out when you came."

"Oh, that was… Sorry for interrupting."

Yukinoshita sounded as if she was simply stating a fact with no intention of blaming anyone, which made me stutter my words. From how she was standing in front of the board when I first stepped into the room, it did seem that Yukinoshita was finalizing things. I apologized for my sudden interruption, to which she gently shook her head, telling me not to mind.

To shift away from this awkward atmosphere, I cleared my throat and asked with a clear voice:

"So, what are these words supposed to mean? I don't really get it."

This time, it was Yukinoshita who seemed awkward, pausing for a short moment before she answered:

"…As I said, we're still reviewing the proposal."

She looked down and didn't say anything further. Well, considering that Yukinoshita doesn't want me to be involved, it makes sense that she would prefer not to elaborate any further.

Which means, ready, set, go, Irohasu chan~ I briefly glanced at Iroha, to which she replied while showing a reluctant face.

"Um… To put it simply, our current focus is to… Make amendments on our clothing restrictions? Am I saying this right, Yukinoshita-senpai?"

As Iroha turned around to confirm with Yukinoshita, probably thinking that it's not good to just ignore her, Yukinoshita answered reluctantly.

"We plan to enforce our dress code to prohibit extravagant or very revealing clothes. After properly defining the proper requirements, we'll contact the clothing renter from our side to prepare a suitable catalog."

"Oh…"

I see. Setting up a standard for the acceptable dresses in order to guarantee the wholesome appearance of the students during the event. And most students will prefer renting clothes through the student council, so they'll naturally have to adhere to the dress code guidelines. But there are also exceptions…

"What about students who intend to wear their own clothes?"

Iroha then pointed towards the circled words and answered.

"Since most participants will be wearing clothes that meet our guidelines, those students will most probably restrain themselves to not stand out too much from the group."

"Right, peer pressure."

"That's not a nice word to describe it…"

Iroha glared at me, looking disgusted and unhappy. But isn't that exactly what she meant…

Even then, I doubt that everyone would accept blending in with the crowd. No matter which era we're in, there will always be that one eccentric person with thoughts like "I will walk my own path even if that means being different from the others!! Look at my erotic image that makes me stand out from dem plebs!! It's☆party☆time!!", while placing a Pichelle on top of their heads. (Ref 1: A Japan fashion magazine).

"But wouldn't there still be a few students who would wear ridiculous clothing for the purpose of gaining attention? It is an important moment in their school life, after all."

"We're aware of such a possibility. So existing countermeasures have already been planned."

Yukinoshita gave a direct answer but did not elaborate further on her statement. But if I take a better look at these clues, and the answer will eventually reveal itself.

"…Will they really accept or obey the restriction to not upload anything on the SNS?"

I tapped on that unusually small text on the lowest part of the whiteboard. Was this written this small because of their lack of space? Or their lack of confidence in this solution?

Yukinoshita let out a very tired sigh.

"About that, even if it’s hard to have them obey it, it wouldn't hurt to at least have a written notice either."

"Even if any issues arise from that, the responsibility will only fall on them for not obeying the rules, isn't it so? After all, they're no longer kids anymore."

Said Iroha.

While it's true that the graduates are above the age of consent, but there is still the general idea where people above the age of 18 can be viewed as adults, and it wouldn't stop people from criticizing the organizers either. While I was thinking it through, Yukinoshita made another remark.

"We're aware that simply restricting them from uploading pictures online will cause dissatisfaction, so we intend to compensate by hiring freelance photographers, and sell photos or data to the participants after the prom.

"Ah… I see how it is."

For some reason Iroha raised up her chest in satisfaction, I guess girls do have the need of taking cute pictures.

Hiring a photographer and selling pictures won't be a problem. Considering that recent school events such as our sports day also restrict parents from taking photos, while the school openly sells pictures to them.

Even during the Showa period, there are certain occasions where students would bring along a photographer with them for events like their graduation trip, and purchase photos from them. So this should be acceptable to the parents.

This might even bring us some interesting stories like, someone writing down the purchase number of the picture that has his favorite girl in it, only to be noticed by the other students. asking him: "Yo, this picture doesn't have you in it, no? Let's see… Bruhhhhhhh!" Rumors then quickly spread around among the class, the poor guy getting teased by his classmates, and getting rejected on the second day before he could even confess. Any parent who had such a painful experience will understand what selling photos really mean, wouldn't they?

Cough.

Anyway, setting it up as a written rule on the surface, bringing out the argument where it's their own responsibility to obey the rules, and convince those who felt dissatisfied by bringing up the advantages of this rule, while preparing an alternative choice for the students. A viable plan indeed.

The students might go against it, but what's more important is that the student council have a relevant point that can be accepted by the parents.

While uncertainties still exist, being able to show the parents that the organizers have countermeasures to deal with the concerns they expressed is what matters here.

"I see… A good plan indeed."

"Thank you."

I briefly made a remark while staring at the whiteboard, to which Yukinoshita replied with minimal words.

Even if it’s only an outline, the amount of thought put into it within such a short time is incredible.

However, there are still a few parts I can question.

"So with this, what are the expected chances of winning?"

I asked them as I knocked on the whiteboard with the back of my finger. Iroha made an ‘uhm’ sound looking displeased, while Yukinoshita did not show any changes in her expression and answered in her usual calm tone.

"We took their concerns into consideration and came up with methods to deal with said issues. I believe that our chances of getting their approval won't be low."

"Well yeah, that seems to be the case. They'll approve of the improved proposal now that you dealt with their concerns… under normal circumstances, that is."

But I know that things won't be that simple this time.

This is not the same situation as the ones we've always dealt with.

All these weird concerns and requests from the parents were presented to us based on the absolute intent of shutting down the graduation prom. Not with the intent of making the prom a reality, nor the intent of expecting improvements from its organizers. No matter how many compromises will be made, the chances of them approving the event are still slim. We're lacking a crucial element if they wish to get past such ill intent.

The one crucial element that Yukinoshita can't obtain. Or specifically, can't attempt to obtain.

And this is where I step in.

I've been observing Yukinoshita's reactions in order to find an opening to talk to her, now seems to be the right moment. I glanced at Iroha, which she nodded lightly in approval.

"Yukinoshita, there is something that I wish to properly discuss with you."

Hearing that, Yukinoshita looked at me with an astonished face.

"…Alrighty, then I should probably see myself ou…"

Pretending to react towards the atmosphere, Iroha stood up intending to leave. But Yukinoshita stopped her immediately.

"I believe that it's related to the graduation prom? If that's the case, it's better for Isshiki-san to stay present too."

"Ahaha… Is that so?"

Answering her awkwardly, Iroha glanced at me briefly. I shook my head, telling her that it's fine. Iroha then sat back down with an uneasy look on her face.

I'm aware that Yukinoshita does not want me to be involved. In fact, she probably prefers to avoid having a conversation with me at all. That's why she asked Iroha to stay, as the presence of a third person might make it harder for me to speak out.

But if that's the case, then I just have to hold onto my resolve.

"…Can I help out with the prom?"

Right after I said that Yukinoshita's eyes opened wide, seemingly in shock. She then lowered her gaze and slightly opened her mouth as if she was about to say something.

If I simply waited for her to give a reply, she'll definitely try to derail the conversation like she did just now. So I interrupted her by continuing to speak, forcing out every reason I could think of without leaving any gaps in between.

"I don't think that there are any problems in your amendments to the proposal. But the rate of success isn't too high. So we should probably work on another set of proposals. I know that the original proposal has been rejected, so maybe we can think of a third or fourth option on how to change things up."

As I continued to speak, I realized that what I said doesn't seem to convey my message properly. But if I take any pauses I'm afraid that I might end up feeling breathless.

"Now that things have developed to this stage, it’s not like I'm taking the initiative to do something. I'll simply act based on your instructions, just look at me as a character who comes up with a few ideas while standing near the wall. This kind of role has no difference from that of Iroha and the others right? Just doing the kind of thing that I usually do, that's all I wish for."

Yukinoshita lightly bit her lower lip and listened silently, she doesn't seem to be angry or sad, as if she's trying her best to suppress her feelings.

"…Indeed, just like how things have always been."

"If that's the ca—"

Yukinoshita interrupted, lowering her head as she continued speaking.

"In the end, I'll still have to rely on you…"

Her voice seemed to sound calm and steady, yet every word she said was dropping a suffocating pressure on my chest.

Yukinoshita lifted her head back up, staring at me with a smile which resembled that of a mother looking at her playful child. She gently, slowly, said those words of persuasion.

"Which is exactly why I wish to change it. Those words that my sister said, you know too, don't you?"

"I… Yes."

Hearing her say that, I couldn't help but avert my eyes.

Codependency.

Perhaps it’s not just me, Yukinoshita herself is aware of that term too.

Which is why she refuses to let things remain the way they were, and instead correct what's wrong with our relationship. To become independent.

Meanwhile, I can't even find myself to question what's right or wrong. Simply sugar coating our relationship with a vague term, and constraining myself to such a twisted relationship.

"But… This is something I should take responsibility for. It was never about which side was in the wrong, isn't that right?"

As I fought through my brain to complete this sentence, I looked into Yukinoshita's eyes. They were twitching painfully, which made me look away again. I couldn’t bring myself to continue now that I've seen such an expression from her.

But if I don't say it now, I might never have another chance in the future. After all, I am aware of how much of a troublesome and unreliable person I am.

Which is why I have to let her know. Even if it’s hard to tell her how I feel, even if I can't express those feelings properly, I have to let her know.

"Of course, I can simply choose to step aside and not do anything. But such a method won't change anything for the better. If the methods we've been using up until now are wrong, then we look for a different method, and a different mindset, a different form of communication…"

How could I make my words sound better? I continued to search for better terms to use, yet the monster of self-awareness and rationality continued to bare its fangs at me. Ambiguous thoughts form themselves into a hideous shape as they leave my mouth, every word I say strays myself further and further from their actual meaning. Am I being too anxious? Before I realized it my hands clenched themselves into fists

under the table. I took a deep breath and opened up my palms to wipe off the sweat onto my pants.

Did my words reach her the way I wanted them to?

"So… No matter what kind of ending awaits, I wish to take responsibility for it properly."

No, perhaps it doesn't matter.

"Which is why… I really want to… Help you out."

These words were only said for the sake of my self-satisfaction, for the sake of forcing my wish onto Yukinoshita.

Being aware of the true nature of my actions, I am unable to look into her eyes, thus I could only steer my vision away from her.

"……Thank you. But it’s fine now, you've said enough."

Her voice sounded as tender as the sound of snow falling during the night, a beautiful sensation that felt like it would vanish in an instant, a strong force that could attract every being in this world. Her expression made her seem like she was at peace. In front of such a cute yet pitiful smile, I could only hold back my breath and voice.

Within this frosty silence, Yukinoshita continued to speak in a soft voice.

"It was my fault to begin with, always letting you and Yuigahama-san handle things… That's why we've entered such an unclear situation. If I don't clean things up, none of us will be able to move forward, isn't that right? The one who should be taking responsibility is me."

"…No, it’s my responsibility too."

Yukinoshita lowered her head after hearing my reply, slowly shaking her head. As I struggled to find a better way to continue the conversation, Iroha interrupted us.

"Umm, may I ask how long do you two plan to revolve around the same problem?"

She sounded mad as she asked the question, staring at me and Yukinoshita.

Neither of us could answer her, so we could only continue to lower our heads. I guess that's just how things work between us, no conclusion could be reached no matter how much we talk about it, and our viewpoints will remain as parallel lines. Knowing that, Yukinoshita and I decided not to continue, both of us remained silent.

At the end of the day, my thoughts still failed to reach her.

The message can never be conveyed if we refuse to speak, but even through speech the message still can't reach the other side. Throughout the whole year, we have always had this sort of feeling. That the idea of talking to each other to achieve a mutual understanding is merely an arrogant thought, while the idea of achieving mutual understanding without communicating with each other is merely an illusion.

Which is why we'll always have to properly think on what to say, how to say it properly. Being able to freely speak about any pointless topics, yet remaining silent about the most important things.

But, these feelings that I wanted to express are not some kind of phrase or term, and at the end of the day, I'm not an expert at communicating through words.

In that case, the solution is simple.

Our medium of communication has always been there.

"I understand. Then I'll stop talking about it, I won't help you out either."

Whew, I said it loud and clear. At the corner of my field of view, Iroha took a gasp.

Yukinoshita smiled and nodded her head, looking relieved after hearing my reply.

I already expected such an answer from the beginning. But without properly talking to her I can't be sure of things. If I don't make our positions clear the conversation can't go on.

I smirked and continued.

"……But I never said that I won't oppose you."

"Huh?"

Iroha leaned her head over.

Yukinoshita also seemed confused when she first heard me but closed her eyelids soon after. Had she understood what I was trying to say?

I put up a sarcastic smile and put both of my fists up to my chest.

"I don't think it’s hard to guess what happens when our opinions oppose each other, right?"

After listening to Hiratsuka-sensei's talk about heroes of justice fighting out a solution, this is the hazy idea that I came up with.

When communicating through words wouldn't work out, then I'll express myself through my actions.

"I've been concerned with the prom's status for quite a while after all, so I'd feel kinda upset if the event fails to be approved. But I can't fully approve of your amendments to the proposal either… In that case, I'll make one by myself."

"Are you being serious about this?"

I nodded in reply to Yukinoshita's question.

Even if it’s a one-sided decision, this is indeed a way for me to gain minimal relevance to the graduation prom.

If I give up here, that would mean that I'm denying all the relationships I've built with her and the Service Club.

Which is why I have to try to prove to Yukinoshita that our relationship is not codependency.

To prove to her that all these times we've been through have a more positive meaning to them.

Only after proving that we can slowly move towards a better, more correct relationship.

"Our competition hasn't ended, and not everyone has to go with the same way of doing things either. So, it’s fine for the two of us to take different routes, right?"

Yukinoshita said a similar thing to me a long time ago. But I believe that she still remembers it, otherwise she wouldn't be biting her lower lip right now.

Referring to how we set up the competition back then, as long as the basic structure and concept of the competition hasn't changed, the rule should still apply to our current situation.

I waited for Yukinoshita to reply. But only a few troubled sighs could be heard from her.

Iroha, who was sitting beside the silent Yukinoshita, answered.

"I think this could work, "

"As long as the prom can be approved, the process doesn't seem that relevant to me, and what Yukinoshita-senpai said just now won't matter in this case, so it should be fine."

Iroha's indifferent statement made it hard for Yukinoshita to think of a reply.

The silence within the room continued to loom. Perhaps such silence is the exact answer that I needed. Thinking of that, I let out a breath of relief.

As I guessed, even if I brought up the competition as an excuse, she wouldn't just accept it… Despite her competitive nature, Yukinoshita Yukino is not a simple-minded person.

"…Well, it’s not like I planned on getting approval from your side anyway. I'm just stating what I plan to do afterward, that's the only point that I want you to know."

This is not a negotiation. Simply my notice, my declaration of war.

She should be clever enough to understand the situation. Yukinoshita let out a sigh, took a shallow bite on her lips, closed her eyes painfully, put her hand under her mouth, and started thinking.

Faint sounds of breathing flowed within the silence of the room. But unlike the speechless situation from before, the quietness right now does not give off a sense of rejection but felt more like an intermission towards the next stage.

Yukinoshita tapped on the edge of her lips, which then opened up, letting out a voice that doesn't sound like a sigh or mutter.

"If that's the case…"

Did she originally intend not to say it out loud? The words that just left her mouth paused midway as if they're about to vanish into thin air and never resurface.

As I leaned forward, ready to ask for a follow-up, Yukinoshita opened her eyes. Her grim expression loses momentum slowly, returning into its original calmness.

Like a frozen blue flame, beautiful yet faint. The awe-inspiring clearness of her expression took my breath away, made me forget to ask her to continue, and even filled up my entire field of view.

"The victor will have the right to command the other to do anything… I believe that was the case?"

A sharp light glimmers amongst her pale blue eyes. Unlike how she seemed to be lost in her thoughts a while ago, her eyes are now free of confusion and staring at me openly.

I looked properly into her eyes and nodded in confirmation.

"Yes, that will be the case."

It’s been a while since the last time I had chills from Yukinoshita, this nostalgic feeling that reminds me of our conversation from back then.

The realization that the atmosphere between us went back like how it usually was made me let out a breath of relief.

The tension in the air had finally gone away.

Iroha, who has been listening to our conversation all this time, muttered.

"Ew, what was that all about? Gross."

"Hey now…"

As I looked at her, Iroha lowered her head like a kid who got scolded for saying something inappropriate.

"Hmphhhh… But it really does feel out of place and a little creepy, doesn't it… And Senpai, why are you getting ahead of yourself all of a sudden?"

Iroha blurted out her ridiculous comment with a dissatisfied look on her face, oh come on… As I grunted at Iroha, someone suddenly started to laugh.

"Yes, it does feel a little gross. Ufufufu…"

Yukinoshita laughed in a pretty comical way. It's been a while since I last saw such a carefree laugh from her, a smile as mesmerizing as a blooming flower. To which Iroha nodded her head repeatedly like she's saying 'I know right!' Seeing them acting this way, something that has been pulled tight within me suddenly snapped in half, making me lose my strength uncontrollably.

"You two…"

"Ahaha… *Cough*, that was simply a joke. But now you've reminded me that everything started from that day, indeed."

Yukinoshita held back her smiling face. With the colors of happiness still lingering within her eyes, she stared at me with a provoking look that also felt a little delightful.

"So allow me to finalize things. Both of us will do things by our own methods with the aim of realizing the graduation prom, and the victor

gets to demand something from the loser, is that it?"

"Ah… Yes."

I answered briefly, to which Yukinoshita nodded in satisfaction. I stared at her smug face with my mouth half open.

She probably realized that I was acting strangely, as Yukinoshita looked over and asked.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing… I'm just surprised that you actually accepted the challenge."

I looked over towards Iroha, trying to make sure if I said it the right way. But, probably because she wasn't aware of the competition, she seems to be sulking with a very displeased face, and shrugged at me like she's saying 'I don't even know what's going on here anymore'.

"It’s not really that inconceivable."

Yukinoshita calmly stated that, as she threaded hair over her shoulders.

Hmm… Is this a riddle? But the answer seems pretty difficult to figure out. As I started to try solving the question, Yukinoshita smiled at me triumphantly.

"Didn't you already know? That I really hate losing to others."

With a slightly mischievous smile, in a teasing tone, she revealed the answer to her riddle.

Interlude 2

That was, more or less, a confession.

Or maybe a lover's quarrel, or talking about breaking up.

Though it doesn't matter which one it was. I don't care.

But I felt like an idiot when they let me hear that. I was there, but it felt like they were making me realize that I have nothing to do with it.

It's so disgusting that it makes me want to say vulgar words.

For real. Please take your responsibility seriously.

I glared at the door where Senpai left.

I've never thought that the conversation would end up being complicated in the most proper, precise, beautiful and plain way.

I'm in the mood to go after him and complain.

Being told something like that with a serious face is troubling.

His always whether-or-not-closed eyes that I really don't get. His incessantly dissatisfied mouth bent in a twisted way. His words that I have no idea if they were lies or jokes but are always extremely vague. Even though he's the one who was meddling here, when he suddenly became flustered his reaction was rather pale and was slow to produce a response. Yet, he makes a seemingly serious face super rarely and once in a while and it's sickening to the stomach.

For real, just really. Please take your responsibility seriously.

I mean, he hasn't taken any responsibility yet up until now.

Even so, please don't say "responsibility" lightly as some sort of excuse.

While listening to what Senpai was saying, it seemed like he wasn't looking at me as my eyes were pointed downwards. Rather, I know that he wasn't looking at me but please read the mood when it comes to those kinds of situations. Senpai, Yukino-senpai, and Yui-senpai are all troublesome but I'm somewhat troublesome as well.

Really troublesome.

Remembering that, my hands stopped moving on the work that I've particularly begun.

I looked at the clock. I would absentmindedly look back on what happened earlier. I would think that it's about time to go home. I've repeated these actions many times. Even though I looked at the clock for the fifth time, two minutes haven't passed yet. This was the eighth time that I sighed.

When I sighed for the ninth time, Yukino-senpai lifted her face from the laptop. She wiped her tears gently.

She wasn't wearing her eyeglasses that are apparently effective for eye strain. Those eyeglasses were placed on the side of the desk. Instead, she applied drops on her eyes.

I was shocked when she wiped the tears that suddenly flowed onto her cheeks, so I unconsciously said something unnecessary.

"Uhm, should we go home?"

Yukino-senpai's eyes remained resting somewhere else, seemingly a little bit confused, and then looked at me. Her expression had a different shade that was slightly scary.

"…Right. I'll remain here for a bit, so it's fine if you want to go home early."

"Is that… so…"

With her precise smile and words, I looked at Yukino-senpai's gentle face. I was a bit hesitant to say something. Being told such a thing in a kind way made me feel terrible and it instead becomes harder to go home. As I was mumbling about what to do, Yukino-senpai spoke as though she had already decided that I would be going home.

"Also, we should call the Student Council members starting tomorrow."

"Eh, ha, huh… isn't that a bit too quick? The policy was just decided today, you know?"

"I'll form it by tomorrow. Besides, the prom is going to happen, so it's better if the preparations are made quickly, right?"

Yukino-senpai said that in such an obvious way that my thoughts became dazed and I ended up being completely stupefied.

"…You're declaring it, I see."

"Yes."

Yukino-senpai's reply didn't change. However, I think I may have made an anxious expression. Looking at that, Yukino-senpai made a slightly troubled face. "Uhm…"

I started speaking. But just as I was about to say the words after that… I stopped.

Perhaps it isn't something that I should say.

Yukino-senpai tilted her head in contemplation and waited for the continuation of my words. But I think that, maybe, I shouldn't be the one to say that. So, instead, I smiled lightly.

"…Please don't overwork yourself."

"Thank you. But I'll be fine."

With that being said, Yukino-senpai started typing on the keyboard. The backlight illuminating her white face was sad to the extent that it was

beautiful. It looked like snow that was about to disappear.

"Because this will be the last one …With this, I can finish it."

The words that she whispered weren't directed at me. Her whisper resembled the continuation of that very low voice I heard from earlier. I looked away.

I hurried up and gathered my coat and bag, then hastened towards the door. I can't continue talking with Yukino-senpai, who had gone from being strict to nice, because she might end up saying unnecessary stuff.

However, saying those things honestly makes me somewhat frustrated, and it's not fair.

"…Then, I'll be going. Ah, and the key! I'll leave it to you."

"Yes. Thanks for the hard work."

When I said that cheerfully, Yukino-senpai smiled in return. She stared at the laptop once again, then resumed typing.

That figure was more spirited than ever. It felt like she was really into it, and looked like she was having fun.

Yet, even so.

When I left the Student Council room, I looked back and saw Yukino-senpai…

Who seemed like she was crying.

Chapter 3: Until the very end, Yuigahama Yui will continue looking on

After coming out of the student council room, I dragged my feet that felt heavier with every step. The fatigue accumulated throughout the day pressed heavily onto my body and mind.

When I walked out of the school building, the sun had already gone down. The chilly winds of the night began to erode my body.

I had the chills as a gust of wind blew across me, I reacted by putting on the coat that I've been holding in my hand up until now. The fatigue continued to crawl over my entire body, I can't even get myself to properly roll up the scarf hanging around my neck. The way I'm dressing up probably looks familiar to Takanohana Koji's style in his early days[6].

As I dragged myself with what's left of my consciousness towards the bicycle porch, I remembered that I took the monorail this morning due to the rain.

I continued to drag my feet and turned towards the school gate.

On the road, I saw Iroha running in front of me, her skirt fluttering in the wind.

She seemed to have noticed me too. Before I could call out to her, she ran over with small steps and then landed a punch to the side of my waist.

"Ah, it hurts..."

Due to her wearing soft gloves, I didn't feel any pain at all, but in front of her unhappy expression, I shouted out as if I was in pain to play along with her act. However, Iroha did not seem to cheer up, staring at me with a cold gaze.

"Are you stupid or something? Why did you have to make things so conflicting?"

"No, listen. It's not just me, Yukinoshita also acted really..."

I tried to give an excuse, but Iroha refused to listen, made a hmph sound, and turned around, starting to walk away. I proceeded to follow behind her.

"Listen to me, alright? You did see that, didn't you? How stubborn, how super duper troublesome..."

"Oh hey, good job with your most accurate self-introduction ever."

"You're welco... wait I'm not talking about me. Even though I acted the same way back there."

While saying that, I sped up my footsteps in order to catch up with Iroha. However, the distance between us did not shorten at all.

"By the way, aren't you walking a little too fast? This is the kind of speed one uses when they're trying to get rid of this random annoying guy in front of the train station."

"Ah, I don't need this."

Without looking back, Iroha replied in a low tone.

Yup, that was cold. I guess she won't turn around even if I start shouting Vanilla Vanilla high income[7]. So I continued to follow her footsteps.

If my memory serves me well, Iroha should be heading to the station a mile ahead of us. Even if we take trains that go in opposite directions, we'll still have to start out at the same station.

So I continued to walk upon Iroha's shadow for quite some time.

During this period, neither I nor Iroha said a single word. Only the rustling sounds of dried leaves, the ringing sounds of the bicycles passing by, and the roaring sounds of the wind could be heard.

It is natural for Iroha to feel so frustrated. The conversation between me and Yukinoshita never felt coordinated, to the point that I had to declare my opposition against her. Iroha, who was unaware of the competition going on in the Service Club, probably felt really confused. I even promised her that I'd talk it through properly before we entered the student council room. For things to end in such a way, I really felt sorry.

I guess it's better if I apologize to her, huh... as I was thinking that, Iroha suddenly stopped in her tracks. Standing on the small road beside a park, and under the dim lights from the two vending machines nearby, she let out a weak, frustrated breath.

She then turned around, looking at me speechlessly. She then pointed her finger at the vending machine while remaining silent.

Is she asking for a treat? Well, if this can change her mood for the better, then it's definitely a worthwhile investment. But to look at it another way, she's also offering a peace treaty through me buying her a drink. What a nice person...

I put some coins into the vending machine and started to choose drinks. Warm MAX coffee and...milk tea? No, perhaps bean soup is a better option... or corn soup should be fine too. Eh, whatever. I pressed the button.

I handed over the drinks that I had chosen at random: MAX coffee in my right hand, bean soup in the other. Iroha looked at my drinks of choice and showed a sign of disgust.

"Why does it have to be these two..."

While complaining, probably thinking that it's not nice to straight up refuse them, she took the can of bean soup reluctantly. Chiba residents are surprisingly incompatible with MAX coffee, huh...

She then squatted down, leaning her back onto the vending machine. She took off her gloves, opened up the bean soup, and took a sip, releasing a puff of white breath in the process.

"...So uhm, sorry."

"For what?"

Standing beside the squatting Iroha, I opened up my can, awaiting her reply while drinking. Iroha, who seemed to have some trouble speaking, muttered slowly,

"If I never mentioned the prom, perhaps things wouldn't have ended up being so conflicted."

The way Iroha said it sounded so awkward and intriguing that I found it funny and cute, so I accidentally looked at her in an unnatural way. Iroha then reacted by pulling her scarf over her mouth, saying "what are you looking at..." in a muffled voice. I smiled bitterly and shook my head.

"...It has nothing to do with the prom. In fact, this might be exactly what we needed."

"Eh?"

Iroha looked up at me looking confused. Is it because of the warmth and sweetness of the coffee? My voice sounded a lot softer than I thought. This made me feel a little shy, so I raised my head looking towards the sky.

"If we don't bring things to an end, we'll end up being stuck with our current situation. A destination, or specifically a goal, was needed. It's not just the prom, whatever request we took on would turn up the same way it is right now."

"Is that…so."

Her weak reply made me feel concerned. As I look back, Iroha is hugging her knees while looking down, as if she's thinking over something. But Iroha really shouldn't feel sorry about it.

Me, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama; The relationship between the three of us became distorted before we could realize it. Yes, our relationship did start out being somewhat distorted. But it had been corrected little by little as time passed. And at some point, we managed to create a space that seems comfortable for the three of us.

I am responsible for the collapse of that comfort zone. There are things that I can't stand, things that I find unnatural. But on the other hand, I also ended up wishing that things could stay the way they were, and have the days pass by as we concealed ourselves with shallow words.

Such an unstable state will easily collapse, no matter what junctures come upon it. This time, it just happened to be the prom, as well as Yukinoshita Haruno's interference. Iroha was simply dragged into our mess. So I should be the one to apologize.

"I'm sorry too, for making things so chaotic."

Hearing that, Iroha simply shrugged and answered in a lazy tone,

"Ah... that doesn't matter, actually. Like I said, as long as the prom can be held successfully, I'm fine with anything~"

"Hmph……"

Replying to me with a similarly lazy tone, our conversation came to a sudden halt.

The warmth from the can in my hand was slowly fading. However, neither Iroha nor I were in a hurry to finish off our drinks, as we stared

quietly into the night. Perhaps the fatigue accumulated from this busy day is starting to show itself again. We might be even busier starting tomorrow.

I never wanted to be related to work and labor, yet before I realized it I'm already actively trying to get myself involved with the prom. In fact, I was against this from the beginning, yet I got defeated by Iroha's enthusiasm. Like seriously, where does all her enthusiasm even come from?

"...Hey, honestly speaking, why did you want to organize the prom so badly?"

Iroha glanced at me looking surprised, then pulled herself a distance away from me step by step.

"I mean, you never gave us an actual reason back then."

At least she did show us her determination. But one could say that she only conveyed her determination.

But due to us being familiar with Iroha to an extent, just listening to her determination is enough for us to decide on helping her out.

She talked about wanting to become Prom Queen back then in the clubroom, but that's probably not what she really had in mind. There are times where Iroha would use really shallow words, there are times where she would blow things out of proportion, there are also times where she would make silly jokes, and sometimes she would just come out with random words that popped up in her head.

But Iroha is also smart enough to be aware of the true nature of things. So she probably has a reason of her own to organize the prom.

"Well...it's about that, you know, the thing about Hiratsuka-sensei being transferred away."

"...You already knew about that from the beginning?"

"Well, yeah. During this time when I was going to hand in a report, I overheard it through the conversations amongst the teachers."

Iroha said it without paying too much attention. This girl is truly amazing. Not telling anyone else about the news after learning about it, and silently working on the prom...

As I nodded in admiration, Iroha then said with a slightly embarrassed tone,

"It was at that time when I thought that if I don't properly send her off, if I don't give her a proper farewell, I'll definitely regret it."

"I never knew that you felt...that way towards Hiratsuka-sensei....sniff."

I covered my mouth to hold back my sobs. Muh man, she really, really is a good person. Such a beautiful mentor pupil love...That Iroha, who gets scolded by Hiratsuka-sensei on a daily basis, and always shrugs off her comment with a poker face... Hiratsuka-sensei, your love has really reached into your student's hearts...

As I was feeling moved, Iroha silently looked away and whispered,

"Ah, well, yeah, I don't... to that kind of degree, you know."

"Erm? What? What did you just say?"

But then again, this sounded more like a shitty excuse than an actual reason.

Iroha cleared her throat through a few light coughs, then made a really cute smile and teasingly looked at me,

"Well, isn't Senpai the exact same kind of person? The kind of person who will tell himself that he didn't manage to do anything, and feel regretful over it."

"Well yeah, I guess so..."

It is true that I'm currently feeling regretful at the moment, which made my true feelings blend into my voice, giving it a sense of solidness. Iroha then nodded in satisfaction.

"I'm probably this type of person too."

Her words surprised me a little. As I looked at her in confusion, Iroha made a pale, lonely smile, and looked into the distance.

"I mean, even for someone like me, I don't actually have a lot of friends, isn't that so?"

"What kind of person do you think you look like from the outside..."

"Uhm hmm."

"Please continue"

Realizing that I've interrupted her, I nodded a few times as an apology and allowed her to continue. Iroha gave me a cold look, sighing deeply. She then lowered her head, playing with a small stone beside her shoes, and slowly continued to speak.

"I only have you Senpais. Which is why I wanted to properly send you, Yukino and Yui-senpai, Hayama-senpai...and even Tobe-senpai and a lot of my other Senpais off."

Her intermittent words weaved themselves into a gentle sound, which made the edges of my mouth lose tension. Boy, what an incredible kouhai that I have here. If I don't reply to her in a joking manner, I might really wet my eyes before I know it.

"Ahaha, were you always that good of a person?"

"I'm doing this so that I won't have any regrets. It was all for myself, not for the sake of you Senpais, alright?"

Iroha emphasized her intent and made a hmph sound while raising up her chest. Under the illumination of the vending machine, her slightly reddish ears were exposed among her swaying hair. I should probably pretend that I never saw that.

To claim that all her actions were for the sake of herself, I don't necessarily dislike such an attitude.

"...And that's why I wanted to make the prom."

Iroha looked up into the night sky with a dreamy expression, speaking out her wishes.

"Like this, to purposely work on something troublesome, to spend a lot of time, to think, to drown deep in thought, to the point where we feel stressed, panicked, and start to feel tired of each other ... and finally find ourselves at peace, letting go of something we once held dear. Is this not a refreshing way to bid farewell?"

Looking at how Iroha raised up both of her arms with a wow, I finally understood what she was talking about.

That process she spoke of is probably the path that I once walked on. Can I struggle till the end in such an unpleasant way, and willingly accept our separation?

"... Well, it's not that hard to understand."

"Really?"

Iroha asked half teasingly towards the words that came out of my mouth. Even if I know that she was joking around, her eyes that are staring at me shine with sincerity. So, I remained silent, only showing her a faint smile.

"If that's the case..."

While saying that, Iroha pulled onto my scarf and stood up. She then made a turn with her arm and wrapped it around my neck like a gymnastic ribbon.

"Then be a little serious."

Even though she's still wearing a smile on her face, using a tone completely different from the joking sounds from just before she rebuked me. This distance where we can feel each other's white breath, and the surprise from being scolded by a girl who is younger than me, made me freeze for a moment.

"Ah, ah, sorry..."

I moved a few millimeters of distance away from her and readjusted my scarf. In order to hide my surprised and blushing face ninja style.

Seeing my reaction, Iroha sighed deeply, then grabbed onto the corner of my scarf, playing with it.

"If you don't start acting more serious, I can't get myself to feel serious, too. It's a problem alright, this kind of thing. It's so annoying to think of, it's so hard to deal with, and it's so troublesome. Like very, very troublesome."

Iroha says as she tightens the scarf, pinching it onto my chest. After she beautifully rolled the scarf to the point no air could pass through its gaps, she gave me a neko punch across the scarf.

"Ouch, it hurts..."

Across the soft gloves and tightly wrapped scarf, I didn't feel any pain from her fist at all.

Yet, its sensation continues to echo solidly within my chest.

3-2

I turned on the lights in the living room and whispered that I had returned.

However, no one responded, only the chilly air swirls within the house.

My parents are still at work, Komachi might have gone out too. So where's our beloved cat ... I did some thinking and flipped up the quilt placed over the heater. Among the darkness, a pair of shiny things could be seen. My eyes lined up with those of Kamakura, who's lying down comfortably beside our heater.

Kamakura simply stared at my face, not meowing nor growling, staying motionless. Telling me through his eyes "Human, the cold air is entering, hurry up and close the kotatsu." Huh, it greets Komachi whenever she comes back, but treats me with such an attitude? Why can't he be a little closer to me? Guess Kamakura doesn't like me getting near him huh... I felt uneasy with that thought. I told him "I'm back.", let go of the blanket, and turned on the switch to the heater, which tends to be turned off when no one is left in the house... Time to warm up...

Since the cat already had its share of air conditioning, it's time for the human to enjoy his. I pressed on the remote control, adjusting the air conditioner to greenhouse mode. Warm air then started to blow out, which made me finally feel comfortable. I untied the scarf wrapped around my neck and took a deep breath.

I would usually spend the next few hours lazily lying around, but I don't have that much free time to stay comfy right now.

After taking off my coat I laid down on the sofa, held my phone in my hands, and started to search for information. The keywords being: prom nights.

'I will make the prom happen.' Even though I made such a solid statement, and even though Yukinoshita and I have decided our separate directions, I'm still lacking actual content and resources.

First of all, I'll have to obtain as much info about proms as possible, before shortlisting the things I can do.

After researching a certain amount of info, I pasted them into the notebook, writing down my own comments and ideas, and repeated the process.

The information that I could find on the internet is most probably content that Yukinoshita and Iroha have already gone through and taken into consideration, which makes me feel that no actual progress has been made. No matter how much information I collect, it won't be easy to come out with a proposal that could stand out more in comparison to that of Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita and the others were not wrong in their direction of fixing the issues of the parents' concerns, but their plan doesn't guarantee anything either. Another rejection from the parents or the school will mean that they'll have to start from scratch... urghhh... I don’t understand this~ can’t think of anything~ can't find any inspiration at all~ I struggled with my brain to figure out an idea while rolling on the sofa.

There are less than two weeks until the graduation ceremony. If we take the actual preparation time into consideration, I'm left with two to three days' time to think of a solution. The proposal has to be done before that, it's a deadline that must not be exceeded.

No, wait a second, think about it with a more flexible mindset...

It is true that the deadline cannot be broken, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it can't be delayed, isn't that so? Ah hah, now that's how you flexibly deal with an editor! Truly well played, man am I a genius.

Unfortunately, unlike the flyers back then, the opponent is not an editor, but a scheduled activity that will not change its date. A much stricter timetable is upon us.

We're being forced into a desperate situation right now.

For now, a change of perspective is necessary. This is where I have to change my point of view. As I continued to think, I rolled down from the sofa and kept rolling until I went under the warm quilt kotatsu.

This is definitely a very weird act from the viewpoint of an outsider, but history has proven that people who do strange things tend to be led into new ideas, especially when they have given up on caring about the views of others.

After rolling myself under the blanket, under the dim light Kamakura seemed shocked, and fled to the corner furthest from me, looking at me with eyes that spell "What is wrong with this guy ..."

AHA! EXACTLY WHAT I NEEDED! This is a time where even a cat's paw could be of use! If I place the ball of meat on its paw to rub onto my eyelids, it could heal my tired eyes, bring my soul towards inner peace with such serene grace, lead us towards world peace, and the new series of ARMORED CORE will be released!

Trying to get Kamakura to lend me its paw, I reached out my arm towards it. Kamakura responded by jumping out of the kotatsu.

As I popped my head out of the kotatsu, my eyes lined up with those of Komachi's, not exactly sure when she came back, who stood in front of me with a stern look.

"...What are you doing, brother?"

As she stared at me coldly, Kamakura moved towards her, rubbing his face onto her feet. Komachi then knelt down, rubbing all over Kamakura's body, while maintaining her cold attitude towards me.

"Don't roll around in your uniform, go get a change of clothes first. It's wrinkled and there's hair sticking to it."

"Oh, alright..."

I answered while standing up, and began to loosen my tie while walking into my room.

I quickly changed into my jersey and walked back into the living room. Komachi, who had also changed into her casual wear, could be seen walking into the kitchen.

"Onii, have you eaten yet?"

"Ah, no."

"Mom prepared a pot of stew, are you okay with it?"

"Well sure... not like there are any other choices."

I too walked into the kitchen, secretly looking around to see if there's anything else. But other than the bubbling contents within the clay pot, nothing else could be seen on top of the stove. Come to think of it, we've been having nothing but hotpot for dinner recently ... The pitcher for noodles in the summer and the pitcher for hotpot in the winter, the battle for the strike king title this year is as exciting as usual.

As I showed a displeased face, Komachi pointed at me with a ladle while placing her hand on her waist,

"If you have a problem with it, then make your own food."

"Alright……"

She seemed so uptight about it that I could only nod obediently. Preparing dinner for us even when you're so busy, thank you, mum and dad, very cool.

Well, in comparison to the days where we only had plain noodles, the charm of hotpots lies in how they can come out with different trick balls, sumo pot assorted pot chicken, pot spicy cabbage curry, and even porridge udon and so on, which makes it just so much better. If you post such a thought on Twitter, chances are that you'll receive a bunch of trash replies like "HaNGiNG nOoDLeS Is NoT thAt BaD! aS LoNG aS yoU pUt iN eFForT, yOu cAn COmE ouT WiTH mANy VariATiOnS toO! LOL." that shit is truly annoying. Look, our family cooks noodles for the sake of simplicity, alright? Spending effort on making variations of it is doing the exact opposite. If your reply to them this way, you'll get even more dumb answers like "ThE kEY tO CooKInG DeLIciOuS nOoDLeS oNlY rEQuiReS PlAiN NoOdLEs. CoME ovEr To MuH pLAce, I'lL ShOW yOU HoW it is DoNe." This is just so annoying, inviting people to their place the next day just to prove that. Look, I have my own plans too, alright? This kind of person would spend a few hours talking about the different tastes of plain noodles, just eat them that way, with no other seasoning but a pinch of salt. Looking at these ingredient enthusiasts, salt

enthusiasts and soup enthusiasts arguing with each other is just simply abnormal.

When you're eating something, it's just best not be disturbed by anyone. This sense of freedom is just...how do I say it... like you've been granted salvation! In other words, eating with Komachi is simply the best, isn't that so? Like how that one best brother has always said, Imouto Sae Ba Ii[8].

I then prepared two bowls, scooped up enough rice for both of us and walked towards the kotatsu.

Komachi then carefully brought the pot over. After I cleaned up the table and placed a pad on the table, she then placed the pot onto the table, while I arranged the chopsticks and small bowls.

Komachi quickly filled up the small bowls with food and placed them in front of me.

"Here, which one do you want?"

"Aren't both the same..."

The taste shouldn't be that different ... and I'm not an expert about hotpots, either. But after thinking for a while, I then compared the contents in both bowls.

One has slightly more cabbage and the other has slightly more pork. Not too much of a difference.

But since I was asked to choose, I'll have to decide on one of them. Like how Iroha was forced to choose between the MAX coffee and bean soup just now.

"Ah...ahhhh...so that's how it is."

A thought came to me that made me stare at the small bowls, so Komachi lifted up her head.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"No, nothing."

Answering that, I took the one with more pork in it. Komachi pulled over the other small bowl to her side and slapped her hands together.

"Well then, itadakimasu."

"Alright, itadakimasu."

I and Komachi then started eating. The taste of the soup was properly incorporated into the cabbage and pork, making them quite tasty, very nice. Huh, it’s actually not bad. This might be an extreme statement but boys won't complain about their food as long as there's meat.

We ate silently for some time. The sound of Kamakura munching on cat food could be heard from the far side of the kitchen.

"By the way, you came home pretty early today."

It's been a few days since the two of us had dinner together. I believe that today is the first time since that day our family celebrated Komachi passing her entrance exam. For the few days after passing her entrance exam, Komachi had been eating dinner with her friends and always returning home late in the night.

Komachi listened and nodded, answering as she chewed on the cabbage,

"Well, yeah, been pretty busy here ever since the results day."

"What are you even working on..."

Komachi did some thinking while counting on her fingers.

"Let's see...thank you for all the hard work celebration, congratulations celebration, thank you celebration, long time no see celebration, nice to meet you celebration...and uhhhh..."

"How many celebrations are there exactly..."

By the way, what the hell is a “nice to meet you celebration”... to whom are you even having a first meeting with... Is this sadness? Or is this courage? If this is the case, then it's time to say goodbye to my tears[9].

Looking at my puzzled face, Komachi, who finished counting on her fingers, smiled and reached out to me with a fist.

"Then, then, since there is no reservation today, it's a brother's day? Ehehe, Komachi scored very high with that one!"

"Yes...yes you did."

So she decided to have a brother's day through the exclusion method, huh, well, fine by me. Having said that, this girl is truly nuts. Having so many outdoor activities being planned for those few days, she truly has the spirit of those young people who would decide to hang out somewhere on a whim. Won't she feel tired from being high energy for so many days... This sounds devastating to my mental and wallet health.

"Having too many friends is also a problem, huh..."

I said that while drinking my soup slowly. At least, I can't live that way. Komachi however, didn't seem too bothered by my statement, and answered normally,

"It's not just the school, I have a lot of relations with your student council. We even contact each other on SNS before entering school."

Ah, so that's what the 'nice to meet you' gathering was about. But really? Starting a social group before even entering school? That's some high difficulty game mode.

"...Won't you feel awkward after entering school? Being so friendly with each other before entering school, with the chance of ending up as total strangers when you actually see them..."

Hearing that, the chopsticks that Komachi was holding froze in midair. She then looked at me with an awkward smile and disheartened eyes.

"You really like to talk about such unpleasant things, don't you onii-chan..."

"But that is something that might actually happen..."

"Well... I guess you're right... but it can't be helped, isn't that so?"

How dry~ Komachi superdry~[10] she seemed troubled just now for a moment, but immediately replied to me with a smile. Such a clean direct attitude my sister has ... While I started to feel terrified about how bright my sister's future seems to be, I suddenly remembered something.

"Is that Taishi guy coming too?"

Kawasaki Taishi, the brother of Kawa-something-san, also passed his entrance exam to Sobu High a few days ago. This kid seems to have an interest in Komachi. If that piece of shit is also present at the 'nice to meet you' celebration, then I must eradicate this bug for getting near Komachi! As I'm having very extreme thoughts, Komachi gave me a much more extreme answer,

"Who? Ah, yeah I think he's joining."

"Ouch..."

Without even looking at me, Komachi replied as she added more food into the small bowl. In Komachi's heart, Daishi is just a far relative to us homo sapiens. I'm starting to feel a little sympathetic towards him being mistreated, press F to pay resp ... Nah what am I talking about, I don't care about that kid!

3-3

After cooking some porridge using the rest of the soup, clearing all of its contents, our stomachs were filled up, and I sat down leisurely while drinking a cup of tea.

Komachi put Kamakura onto her lap, grooming him while humming a song, and I started scrolling on my phone while lying down.

A direction has been determined, but it's still lacking context. Prom night, graduation party, I searched through all possible keywords, yet I never came across any inspiring information. I made a deep sigh and rolled over.

My view eventually lined up with Komachi's, who is sitting in front of me. She asked me what's wrong, tilting her head with a cute smile.

Looking at her, I remembered something.

"By the way... you are about to graduate soon, right."

"Yep."

I asked her straightforwardly, to which Komachi nodded while answering.

A strong atmosphere of celebration had been going on since everyone's attention was put into the fact that Komachi will be entering high school. But before that, Komachi will also have to go through her secondary school's graduation ceremony. Even if junior high school and high school might have some differences, they are both based on the concept of graduates celebrating the new phase of life they're about to step into.

I wonder if I can get any inspiration for the prom from her.

"Speaking of graduation, do you have any plans?"

"Hmm? That's a weird question."

Komachi smiled awkwardly, but she also looked up and did some thinking.

"Graduation... Ah, Komachi wants to go on her graduation trip."

Komachi answered as if she just remembered it. At this instant, I sprung up.

"Yoooo, this is the first time I've heard about it. What about me?"

"Huh? Of course you won't be joining us. It's not like we're traveling with our parents or your friends."

I shook my hand towards Komachi in refusal. "No, no, nonononono, having an overnight trip is a no! I won't allo..." I tried holding back my words in my throat as I realized that I was about to say 'I won't allow it, but Komachi seems to have heard half of it and stared at me with a cold look.

Komachi is no longer a child after all... continuing to act like an overprotective brother might be a little too much for us. As a result, Komachi started to look impatient, let out a deep breath, and continued saying,

"And there's the graduation party. Well, which is basically just everyone in the class having a meal together."

"Ok..."

I made a casual response, while secretly writing down notes on my phone.

The graduation trip is kind of a problem, but the graduation party makes sense. Everyone having dinner at the nearby barbecue shop, enjoying the food while chatting, something like that. Or even going to a better place, like the legendary first-class yakiniku restaurant in Japan 'Akamon', for example. At least Akamon's the best option for people living in Chiba. People who live outside of Chiba might probably choose somewhere like 'Sengoku'.

... But then again, when she said 'everyone' in the class, does she literally mean everyone? Like, there tend to be one or two people who never get an invitation (through my observation), you know? The outlier of the class, you know? Apparently, I am quite familiar with this aspect, you know!?

Cough.

Anyway, time to ask her something else.

"So are there any other plans? Or activities of some sort."

"Oh? Activities?"

Komachi seemed confused with my questions, but she suddenly seemed to have remembered something and made a loud wow,

"...Ah, does the three-send party count? Is that the one? I'm not quite sure actually."

"The three-send party...ah, you meant that kind of three-send party."

It's not a term that I'm used to, so it took me some time to figure it out. It's basically what they refer to as the farewell party for third-year students.

Pulling out my memories from my middle school era, in addition to the graduation ceremony, there was such an activity that I went through. Where all members of each class were forced to attend, while being forced to sing a song, too. To which the boys' part in our choir got commented on with stuff like "The boys! Sing properly!" It was so bad that the girl playing the piano cried and ran out, with Orimoto leaving the group to go after her, and me being forced to apologize or something...ouch.

"What do you do during that event again? I remember that you're supposed to sing a song. Graduation themed songs like kabosu, I believe?"

"And sudachi."

"Ah, that one. There's also the song where you go, our dear mother earth~~I think?"

"Yeah, those kinds of songs. Well, but people usually sing "Praise the Land" at the graduation ceremony. There's some other performance too, what was that again..."

Some other performance huh..... I picked up my head and suddenly a memory came to my mind.

"Performance.... ah, is that the one where you go? Hello spring~the light of early spring~ one-two, everybody!"

Komachi then sang along,

"One two, everybody!"

"Graduate~"

"Graduate!"

We split up the boys and girls part, even the two-tone pause in the middle was completely reproduced. Our stupid actions made me smile at Komachi.

"...This kind of feeling?"

To which Komachi responded with a smile and then shook her head while still smiling.

"No, it's a completely different song."

"Eh... I even sang with all that enthusiasm..."

If that's not the one, why didn't she stop me earlier... I looked at Komachi with a look of resentment, to which Komachi replied,

"Also that's a slogan, the one we used back in our elementary school."

"Wait, really? I have no memory of that at all. Well, I've only graduated from elementary school and secondary school. So it's not like I went through a lot of graduations."

Even though I said that, I still wrote about the three-send event in my notes. It might not be something that I can make reference to, but it could give me some inspiration. After all, no one really knows what kind of things could give one inspiration. So I continued to write down singing, performance, slogans and other related things.

This kind of note-taking action works similarly to that of brainstorming. Like what President Tamanawa once said, never rush to a conclusion, any opinions can be considered...

As I started to think about people that I remembered deep in my memories and immersing myself in the nostalgia, Komachi, for some reason, looked at me with pitiful eyes.

"Indeed...Onii-chan still hasn't graduated from Precure and school idols..."

"What are you talking about? There's no graduation to those, it's a lifetime education. People don't just graduate from them by not watching. That's just them being a dropout, a cultural studies dropout!"

"Onii-chan at this point, you're just a repeating student..."

In response to my protest, Komachi gave up debating and sighed deeply.

Ayyy that's my Komachi, she truly understands me. As I reviewed the events that happened throughout the year, and how I still didn't manage to grow, the repeating student statement surprisingly fits me. Without realizing it, I let out a smile mixed with self-abuse.

Seeing my expression, Komachi tilted her head in grief. But she seems to have decided not to talk further about this topic, and asked me a different question,

"Are there no three-send ceremonies in high school?"

"Ah, no, there doesn't seem to be such a thing."

At least for this year, there are no signs that this activity will be held. Probably because every club might have their very own annual party. Back then I never joined any clubs, so I'm not quite sure about that.

Perhaps I should ask someone else about this next time? So in my notes, I wrote down "Chat with Totsuka❤".

The result of my solo brainstorming brought me to a pretty good conclusion. I had a sense of satisfaction, so I put down my phone and looked at Komachi, who had laid her head down on the kotatsu.

"Is that so... Well, I guess it makes sense that high school students won't do such an activity."

Komachi muttered seemingly disappointed. She continued to hum and played with Kamakura. The melody sounded familiar, probably a classic graduation song?

As I listened to this lonesome song, I turned off the notepad on my phone.

"Well, we don't really have a three-send activity, ... but starting as of this year, we'll be doing a prom."

I opened up the browser, and showed her the prom-related web pages that I just went through, Komachi looked through the pictures and videos I showed her and gave off a surprised expression.

"Oh... Wow, what is this, this is so cool! Oh my, onii-chan~...are you really gonna do this?"

Komachi looked up, her eyes sparkling with strong expectations. My mouth twitched for a moment, but I managed to force a smile while nodding at her. Even though I didn't make a direct statement, my reply also implied that the prom will become a reality.

There's no proof to show her that it'll actually happen, and we're behind schedule for preparations. In fact, I don't even know how we'll work it out.

But the prom will happen.

At least this one statement is what I can be sure of.

3-4

Even after a night's sleep, the fatigue from yesterday continued to linger.

After laying down inside the kotatsu for some time alongside Komachi, midnight fell, and I traveled across somewhere between reality and dreamscape, fell down onto my bed and completely snoozed off.

When I came to my senses it was already morning and about time that I headed to school. I went out after having breakfast and changing into my school uniform, but I can't be sure if I can even make it before the class bell rings.

Komachi seemed to have slept at the same time as me, but she woke up looking energetic, had already changed, and went out earlier than me.

From my calculations, my sleeping time should be that of an average person. But sleepiness continued to shroud over my head. Thanks to that, my feet felt heavy as I pedaled my bike.

The gears in my brain and the gears on my bicycle didn't seem to move a lot, as opposed to the hands that continued to turn on my wristwatch.

I have to make preparations for the prom starting as of today.

There's not much time left and the means that can be taken are limited. Even under such circumstances, I have yet to lay out a specific plan. Not to mention that there are people who I made big promises to.

The more I think about it, the more tired my legs felt. But after using all my strength on peddling, I finally passed through the main gate a short moment before the bell rang.

I sped up my steps walking forward. The stairs that linked the classrooms seemed crowded, as students who'd just ended their morning club activities and students who're almost late like me rushed along.

Among them, I noticed some slightly peach colored hair walking so quickly that her bag, her long scarf, and her hair bun leaped up and down

along with her footsteps.

After recognizing Yuigahama, I hesitated to call her as I was reminded of that scene from yesterday. Soon, Yuigahama came to the shoe rack area and began to change into her indoor shoes.

The moment she noticed my presence, her actions paused for a moment. Then with a faint smile, as she placed her small hands over her chest, something seemed to have jiggled in my view.

This action made me feel slightly embarrassed, so I nodded at her a few times, pulled my scarf up, and ran towards the shoe rack in small steps.

Yuigahama whispered to me while poking her hair bun,

"Good morning."

"...Morning."

After a short moment of eye contact, I immediately shifted my line of view towards the indoor shoes that I just threw on the floor. As I pulled onto the end of shoes trying to make them fit, Yuigahama waited quietly beside me.

I knocked on the floor with the tip of my shoe, indicating that we can head over now. She nodded and began to walk as if she's guiding the way.

"Ahhh, that was so close, we're almost late back there."

While speaking, Yuigahama took off her scarf, rolled it into a ball, and hugged onto it, using her usual cheery expression and tone.

The way Yuigahama acted normally made me feel unnatural in return, but I can only go along with her words, nodding in reply.

Even though I was aware that something felt off since she’s acting like her usual self, it's better not to bring up what happened yesterday. But the thought of not mentioning it made me feel dishonest. So I made sure that there were no other students near us and whispered to her,

"Were you alright yesterday?"

"Eh?"

I wondered if that question was said so straightforwardly that I surprised her, as she stared at me, tilting her head. But she seemed to have remembered yesterday's events and put her hands over her cheeks.

"Ah, um. No problem at all! Sorry, I felt a little... ehehe, like, a little embarrassed about it... I said it before, didn't I, that kind of thing happens often to me."

Anxious, shy, embarrassed, awkward, after a series of changes in her expression, she finally let out a smile. Noticing that as her cue to end this topic, I smiled and nodded in reply. Even if something felt odd, I should avoid pursuing it naively, breaking it down, pushing it away. It might not be long, but the time we've spent with each other is enough to make finding a comfortable distance a common skill between us.

I began to climb the stairs. While Yuigahama willingly stepped in front of me, I followed up with a slower pace. Have most students already entered their classrooms? No other people could be seen by us. As we stepped onto the wide platform at the middle of the stairs, Yuigahama looked back at me from her side.

"So what about Hikki? How did things go after that?"

"Well... a lot of things happened. As a result, I decided to intervene with the prom."

"I see,"

She made a smile looking relieved, then turned back around and continued to move forward. I nodded while looking at her back and said with my heavy mouth,

"So for today... you should go home before me."

In reality, we didn't actually make an appointment to go home together. Realizing that I acted overly self-aware by saying this, a feeling of disgust emerged from the depths of my heart. As I was criticizing myself for misunderstanding things, Yuigahama nodded in reply.

"Sure."

Feeling that I was saved, I continued my sentence,

"Not just today, throughout this period of time."

"...Yeah, I understand. It's to help out Yukinon, after all."

Yuigahama continued to walk up the stairs step by step. We then soon reached the third floor where our classroom is located. While looking at her at half a step's distance, I pulled off my scarf. After getting rid of the suffocating tension around my neck, I turned my head a few times to relax.

It’s better if I talk to Yuigahama about how things went yesterday. Putting aside whether she could fully understand it, it's better to let her know more about it.

"No, actually... instead of helping her, I actually ended up going against her."

"Uhm, su....re? What??"

Yuigahama who has been walking smoothly all the time made a sudden stop, turning her entire body around. With her mouth wide open, her shock and confusion were being expressed throughout her whole body. Her reaction was so huge, to the point where it actually felt refreshing. Guess being honest about my mistake was a good idea after all.

"Uhhh yeah, how do I say this... She was so stubborn, that my request to help out became a no go. So I decided to oppose her. Otherwise, I can't find another way to get involved."

"Ha...ha..."

Yuigahama, from struggling to receive the info to slowly understanding the things that have happened, turned her confused expression into a conflicted one.

"How do I say it... Hikki, you make super clumsy decisions at times..."

"The other way of saying that is; that I'm occasionally super smart."

I gleefully walked past Yuigahama, raising my chest for no apparent reason, while wearing a smug smile on my face.

As she saw my expression, I could hear that Yuigahama snorted. She then seemed to struggle for a while and asked me,

"Did you talk through it properly?"

"……Can properly talking through things solve anything?"

It's me and Yukinoshita, mind you. I added such a reminder. Yuigahama then made a deep sigh, seeming to have understood the situation.

As expected of Yuigahama, she really understands us.

"It can't. Which is why we agreed on having a competition. Anyway, we first have to complete the prom. Otherwise, nothing else can be done.... stuff like club activities, or even thinking about how we move on from here."

The more I spoke, the more questions came into my mind.

End the prom and then what? What should I do about the service club, how do I deal with this medium that no longer operates? What do we think about our futures?

As I continued to think, I reached the entrance of our classroom.

Yuigahama's footsteps sounded light and slow, as if she was feeling moody as we were walking, but when she was about to reach the door she suddenly stopped. What happened? I looked back and saw Yuigahama thinking something through.

She then looked up, staring at me seriously.

"...Can I help?"

Yuigahama was tightly gripping onto the strap of her school bag, her eyes filled with an unwavering determination. Looking at the strong expectations showing in her closed mouth and big eyes, such an expression made it impossible for me to refuse.

Interlude 3

I don't get it at all.

When I'm sitting at my seat, when I'm chatting with the others, when the lesson bell rings, even when the class begins, I have been thinking about the same thing all this time.

To the point that I confused myself. Telling myself that this is fine, that things should end this way, to the point that my tears fall. I just don't get this at all.

But...yeah. That's the kind of people they are, the kind of people who look smart on the outside even if they are actually clumsier than they thought.

Repeating the same way of doing things to the point that none of us could realize that a different option exists. To oppose each other, to compete with each other. Without creating such a reason, neither of them could get closer to each other.

An excuse made to convince themselves.

Whoever wins the competition will have the right to order the other to fulfill a wish.

Her wish was probably decided ever since the beginning.

A wish that has the same nature, yet with a completely opposite intention than mine. Two wishes that are so similar, yet so different.

There is only one way to fulfill that wish of hers.

But that definitely shouldn't happen.

No matter what, if they end up going back to being complete strangers then nothing can bring them back together.

.....But even this is probably just a statement used to escape reality.

The words on the blackboard have been wiped off before I could copy any of it, and we have reached the next page of the textbook before I realized it.

People seemed to be chattering within the class, yet I can't hear any of those voices, only the scrubbing sounds of chalk and pencils, and a soft sigh near me echoed into my ears.

The instant I diverted my view, a familiar person enters the scenery.

The head that is supported by the left hand, a pair of eyelids that are about to close, the remaining right hand that spins a pen delicately between its fingers. The head then lowers down a bit, seemingly deciding on reading a textbook on the table...But, a sense of fatigue seems to linger about, as it struggles very hard not to doze off during the class. It had been like this throughout the whole day.

I can still see him, we can still see each other.

Even if we ended up moving to different classes, even if it ends up going unnoticed, even if no one becomes aware of it, even after understanding each other thoroughly, things will only be the way it has always been.

Which is why I have to hide away these feelings, seal them within the depths, and put up my best smile possible.

Such a sly, disgusting person.

Chapter 4: Once again, Hikigaya Hachiman elaborates

The classroom is filled with noise after school.

During class, I was thinking while occasionally snoozing, but for now, I'll put that matter aside. I began to pack up my stuff to go home. I put on my coat, wrapped up my scarf, and stood up carrying my empty bag.

My first targeted location is at the back of the classroom, the corner next to the windows. It had been a while since the bell rang, so most students had already left the classroom, while a small group of people stayed behind, gathering at that corner.

In the center of the group sat our queen, who's pulling her blonde straight-rolled hair while tapping her phone with her nails. Standing next to her are Ebina-san and Yuigahama, whose backs could be seen from my direction. Hayama and the three animals are standing against the window, getting ready to leave for club activities.

They seemed pretty immersed in their enjoyment of freedom after school, chatting happily among each other. I had no choice but to interrupt them.

To be fair, attempting to channel myself into their conversation felt like a huge pain. It's already taking a lot of perseverance to even approach them, and there's just no way I can get myself to speak to them at all.

But right now, I'm taking the position of requesting help from Yuigahama. So it should be me to take the initiative. Waiting at my seat until Yuigahama comes over is a really disgraceful act. Just like, during the break time of an anime voice recording session, the kind of light novel author who would deliberately sit at the middle of the hall in the recording studio and wait for voice actors to approach him, truly a disgraceful act.

Then again, I'm already a disgrace myself. But even a disgraceful person should know when to push themselves harder. So right now is the time I take the courage to move forward.

Slowly and slowly... one step two steps... approaching them as slowly as a Kyogenshi (Ref 1: 'Mad singing', one of the two formats for Japan's Noh dramas). Is it because I'm walking too slowly? Miura and the others didn't seem to be too bothered, talking about their plans on where to hang out next time. My tempo is so slow, that I feel like I can release a Motoya hand knife in mid-air. (Ref 2: Izumi Motoya, originally a Kyogenshi, who then participated in pro wrestling exhibition matches, he once used a trick where he jumped onto the other side of his opponent, striking him with a strong hand knife before even landing onto the ground, also known as the 'Motoya midair hand knife', yeah I spent 15 minutes on this reference)

Approaching millimeter by millimeter, quietly stepping until I'm directly behind Yuigahama, I then made a light cough.

"...I'm about to leave, should we?"

"Ah, sure. I'll be going, too."

Yuigahama replied with a plain tone as she looked back. She then picked up her bag and waved at Miura and the others.

"See you tomorrow."

"Ok."

"Bye-bye."

Miura nodded without seeming too bothered, while Ebina smiled and waved.

Two of the three animals looked at each other in shock and the remaining animal went "Eh? What? YO!?" while looking towards us multiple times. Truly a gang made of annoying species.

Hayama glanced a little, showing an incredibly warm smile.

What the hell, this is just super embarrassing and tiring. This is the kind of situation that makes people want to go commit suicide...

Looking back, the odd sensation still seemed to be lingering within the atmosphere. I sped up to leave the classroom, pulling up my scarf without forgetting to cover my face.

I slowed down after entering the corridor. Yuigahama, who also rushed out of the classroom, walked beside me, saying with strong intensity,

"By the way, what was that about!? Can't you just approach us in a more normal way? Getting close thissss slowly is very scary, alright!? You actually scared me for a moment."

"Well, it can't be helped ..... I was super nervous back there..."

The process of approaching them used up almost all of my strength, even now I could only make a low exhausted voice.

Yuigahama let out a breath of dissatisfaction but then gave me a troubled smile.

We walked shoulder to shoulder until we reached a corner. The special block to our left, and the stairs to our right.

"So what do we do next?"

"Ah... right, we'll have to decide what we should work on... For now, let's get to a place where we can talk about it."

"Sure, how about Saizeriya?"

"Alright, let's go."

Even though there was the choice of using the service club room, neither I nor Yuigahama mentioned it. Not because we've forgotten, but because that place can now be ignored. I believe that Yuigahama's reasoning behind it is similar to mine.

That place can only be established under *her* presence.

Which is why we'll probably never enter that room again.

4-2

We walked for a while after leaving school.

As we reached the Saizeriya located in front of the station, we immediately ordered two self-service drink counters, then walked towards the drink counter to get our drinks, taking a break as we sipped through straws. I originally planned to order something like spicy Milanese rice, chicken wings, or pasta. But today we aren't actually here to eat, so getting a drink is enough for now.

While I was having such thoughts, Yuigahama had already opened up the menu.

"I'm feeling a little hungry right now. What about Hikki? You want some food too?"

Yuigahama sat in the middle of the quadruple seat in front of me, leaning forward and looking through the menu left and right, seeming busy. From time to time, I could sense something flashy swaying across the table, please don't do this any longer. Ah right, I already ate lunch just now...

"By the way, what do you usually have for lunch?"

The moment right after I asked this question, Yuigahama's hands, which were moving across the menu, stopped. She then let go of the menu and leaned her back against the chair.

"...Just your regular food...why do you ask?"

As she whispered super softly, Yuigahama swiftly turned her head to the side, twisting her body while trying to make it not look obvious. I can sense her struggling to shrink her belly down to make herself look slimmer... Which ended up emphasizing her good body parts instead! I looked away while making light coughs.

"No, that's not what I'm trying to say. I mean, didn't you always have lunch in the club room? So how are you dealing with it recently?"

"Ah, so that's what you're trying to ask..."

Yuigahama exhaled looking relieved. Then, she took some time thinking about it silently and answered slowly,

"Yukinon said that for this period, she plans to eat while working in the student council room. So I have been eating with Yumiko and the others for the past few days... and usually the same after school."

"I see."

Yuigahama nodded after hearing my short reply, swirling the straw placed in her glass.

Yuigahama and Yukinoshita have spent time with each other for almost every lunch break and after-school session. And before Yukinoshita returned to her family's house, Yuigahama also tended to hang out with Yukinoshita at her unit, so they probably also spent most of their nights and holidays together. But ever since the prom thing happened, Yukinoshita began to focus on her job more, so they probably won't have such an opportunity for the time being.

How will things continue to develop? After the prom, as we enter the next year, will they still be spending time with each other?

"... Well, for now, let's focus on completing the prom."

In an attempt to interrupt myself from thinking any further, I brought up a different topic and drank up all of the remaining ice coffee. Even though I put in quite an amount of milk and gum molasses, it still tasted bitter.

Yuigahama looked downwards at the glass she was holding, biting her straw. After taking a sip, she nodded heavily.

"So what plans do you have?"

As she looked back up, Yuigahama had already gone back to her cheery expression. Which made me remember how our conversation usually felt. I began to talk about the things that I've been considering last night while holding onto the back of my neck.

"So, although I've been thinking about it for a long time, it seems that just organizing an ordinary prom is a very risky idea. A proposal that has already been criticized once usually won't be approved."

Up until now, by referring back to my experiences with proposing sessions like during the cultural festival, the Christmas event, and some other events, the prom is in a very severe situation.

The other events that we were involved in were already approved and we helped to improve things. But right now, the parents simply demanded that the organizers completely cancel the prom instead of improving it.

It doesn't matter how many times the proposal gets revised, as long as the core concept of a prom exists, it's safe to say that they won't change their view of the event.

Most importantly, the fact that the event has already been disapproved once will become our biggest obstacle.

A proposal that had been marked as a failure can't get rid of that image easily. Thanks to that, presenting improvements to it won't necessarily make them give positive feedback.

The bad impression that the public has towards proms and the fact that this proposal had already been rejected before will cause them to view it with a biased attitude. Which is why fixing the core problems that the event has is ironically not the best solution.

I bit onto the straw, sorted out my thoughts, and presented my conclusion.

"...Which is why a new bias is needed."

Yuigahama opened up her mouth and slowly muttered,

"Bias... ah! Vibes?"

"No."

Why are you showing me that "I got it!", "Hey, I totally know that!" kind of expression? It’s totally wrong, 'bias' has nothing to do with 'vibes'.

Guess it's better to explain the term to her.

"Bias is uhm...think about propensity or prejudice.... it means that one is viewing something with a false image under the influence of a generalized thought process. Well, yeah, something like that."

"Hngh.....?"

Answered Yuigahama, who ended up scratching her head. Why does it seem like she doesn't understand it... Well, I don't particularly remember its actual definition either. I just need to let Yuigahama understand it.

But what I really need her to understand is what I'll be talking about next.

"So basically, in order to change their bias, we need to come up with a proposal that is visually different from the prom Yukinoshita and the others are working on."

After hearing that, Yuigahama's mouth seemed to open up even wider. And, she eventually looked at me with a suspicious look.

"...But why?"

"Right now the idea of a prom itself is considered an absolute evil. But what would happen when a much more vicious presence appears in front of them? This will make the previous prom proposal look much better in comparison right?"

"I... see?"

Although she said that, Yuigahama still seemed conflicted on the idea. Even the way she said her agreement had turned into a question.

How to explain it better... as I started thinking, Saizeriya's menu happened to flash across my eyes. I opened up the menu and flipped to its last page, where various desserts are.

"...Sugar makes people fat. So it's a better idea not to have ice cream and desserts, right?"

"Well, yeah, why did you ask that all of a sudden..."

Yuigahama grunted while twisting her body, turning her unhappy face away.

"But if you add on new choices of ice cream that come with half of their original calorific value, you might end up trying it, right?"

"Well yeah, I'll probably eat two of them..."

"No, what the f... Well, that's basically it."

Yuigahama seemed so attracted to the pictures on the menu that I had to cough before going back to our topic.

"So the plan here is to come up with a plan that will be abandoned. Choose one out of two, make the parents feel that they can't refuse on making a choice between them. Propose the sacrificial plan and have them abandon the sacrificial plan, which in return means the approval of the main proposal."

The current situation is that they only have the choice to approve or reject the proposal for prom proposal A.

However, if we propose a prom proposal B, the parents will end up with the mentality that they're selecting between Plan A and Plan B, excluding 'rejecting the prom' from their selection list as a result.

"Ah... so that's what you meant. So Yukinon and Isshiki-chan's prom will be the ice cream with half the calories."

Yuigahama nodded in confirmation, but the nodding soon stopped and she suddenly looked up at me.

"But if they've already demanded to cancel the prom, wouldn't they just reject both proposals, anyway?"

"Yeah about that...."

Hearing this, I slapped my forehead.

What Yuigahama just pointed out is the weakness of such a strategy. Even though Yuigahama is an idiot, her brain isn't actually bad at all. Still an idiot, though.

This strategy tends to work well against hesitant opponents. But in our case, the opponent already came to a conclusion, so making them choose between two options wouldn't be as effective as it seems.

So even though I'm adding this statement quite late, it is necessary to let her understand that we have another prerequisite.

"...Actually, that shouldn't be a problem."

Listening to that, Yuigahama picked the side of her head again.

“Our school actually has no intention of canceling the prom. Otherwise, they wouldn't have used the term 'self-restraint'. Our school is well known for its respect towards the autonomy of its students. In fact, it was even used as our school motto.”

"Ah, yes... considering that so many events were held before..."

A slight sense of doubt still lingers within Yuigahama's tone, but she still tried her best to agree with me.

Taking our school motto into consideration does seem unreliable. But like what Yuigahama said, our students did organize a lot of large events like the Christmas party. None of these were rejected by the school, which means that the school authorities have always intended to let their students organize activities with no strings attached. Hiratsuka-sensei herself even mentioned that the school originally did not think that there were any problems with organizing a prom.

"The school still needs to care for their reputation after all. If they straight up shut down the prom, they'll look ugly if the word got spread out. So, if Yukinoshita can come up with a safer proposal, it shouldn't be hard to make the school our supporter. We'll have to count on Hiratsuka-sensei regarding that."

"Mhm."

After listening to me, Yuigahama nodded, seemingly assured.

Actually, now that Hiratsuka-sensei has successfully obtained their verbal promise of “exercising self-restraint”, as long as we can come up

with the second option, Hiratsuka-sensei should have a certain level of speech and influence over the parents' choices. Which means that we can have a positive outlook over the school's possible actions.

The other big problem here is the negotiation with the parents. The more I think about it the more it feels depressing, to the point that I ended up biting my straw.

"And then there's the parents... Specifically, the more vocal ones ... If we show them the options we're providing and eventually lead them into thinking that they're choosing out of their own will, it should please them enough to make them stop complaining..."

In most occasions, people who complain the loudest have no interest in debating over the content of the subject but simply look for victory against their opponents. Therefore, as long we make the other party come to this impression of, "it was I who decided, it was I who changed their actions, it was I who made them apologize", and endure their criticisms and complaints, then things should end on a good note.

No, to be honest, this doesn't feel convincing.

This time it was me who picked up my head.

"...That's what I think, what about you?"

While sighing, I started to think about Yukinoshita's mother.

The fact that the people who came over to the school weren't the parents who had doubts with the prom, but Yukinoshita's mother instead, let me see a ray of hope. After all, her role was of a mere messenger. Her speech could either be seen as that from a member of the parent council, or the words from the wife of a local authority. At least that's my impression towards her original rhetoric.

But then again, as expected from the mother of the Yukinoshita sisters, the longer the conversation went on, the stronger the arguments she presented, to the point where even we got sold on her statements.

That mother also likes to talk over things. She also followed up with Iroha's counterarguments without looking bored. No, instead of saying

that she enjoyed the conversation itself, what she really enjoys is defeating her opposition.

In this case, it's hard to say whether Yukinoshita's mother will simply give up arguing or not.

Which means we'll also need to prepare something to deal with her... Please don't be like that, I really don't want to be involved with her. Mrs. Yukinoshita is just too terrifying, for real...

So for the time being, this is what I managed to come up with.

“So basically, we'll show them that we have the right to forcefully execute the event while trying to convince them into our controllable options.”

I spat out the straw in my mouth that has been wrinkled into a ball and presented my conclusion. Yuigahama then gleefully smiled at me in admiration.

"Wow...Hikki, you should be doing this kind of job in the future! Some complaint correspondent kind of profession! It really suits you!"

"Absolutely not... that's not how it works and I don't plan to get a job, either."

I can't find myself feeling happy about this statement even in front of her sparkling eyes, and I unconsciously revealed a disgusted expression. Yuigahama, however, continued to smile happily.

No, I'm really not suitable for this? Also dealing with complaints with this approach as an employee would definitely get me fired. My plan will only work due to the unique environment of the school and my position as an unemployed person.

Not to mention that there is already a standard reply to deal with most complaints.

It's simple, just blame our boss! Or just transfer their calls to customer service and have the professionals deal with them.

"Well, we haven't actually started any actual work, either. So up next, we'll have to deal with the real troublesome stuff."

"What do you mean..."

Listening to that I sighed deeply, crossed my fingers, leaned my body slightly forward, lowered my head to make a Gendo pose (Ref 3: The signature pose of commander Ikari from EVA) and said in a deep tone,

"We still have to make preparations for the sacrificial plan. It needs to look like actual effort has been put into it and has a realistic aspect in the view of outsiders. Otherwise, it won't even qualify as an option."

"Ah, so that's how it is..."

Yuigahama seemed to have moved slightly backward. So I moved a little forward as if I'm chasing after her.

"Which means that we're short on people and time. Also, we have no budget at all."

"So what resources do we actually have..."

As Yuigahama asked with a troubled smile, I made a shallow smirk.

"Introducing the beings who have too much free time, requiring no salary in return.....Our school's students! They're completely free and always ready to be used."

"This is too shady!"

Yuigahama shouted out while grabbing onto her head.

But right now, it is true that if we don’t recruit the most professional talent in our school and squeeze out every ounce of their efforts, there will be no other way for us to make a comeback. This is Sobu High's newly revised labor system, a system that turns the most professional experts into slaves... (Ref 4: Japan introduced a new standard to their labor system some time ago, employees of the higher hierarchy will no longer have an allowable limit to their overtime hours, and working

overtime will no longer get them paid... Man they actually approved this.)

Yuigahama, who had sunk into her seat seemingly discouraged, looked up at me through the gaps in her bangs,

"But for such a plan that was never meant to be approved, can we even find anyone that is willing to help?"

"You're right..."

As I replied, I too, looked up at the ceiling.

As she said, it wouldn't be this difficult to recruit people if we're actually trying to organize an ideal prom. After all, no one would like to become a sacrificial Yamcha. Only the most foolish of all fools, the nicest of all nice people, or high-end eccentrics would be interested in working for such a thing.

Unfortunately, we'll have to give up on direct recruitment. Which also means that the methods we can use are limited.

"I'll try not to disclose our true purpose, and try convincing them as much as possible... As long as we avoid ending up with a financial deficit, and properly apologizing to them afterward, yeah, things should be fi..."

If pleading for mercy could solve the problem then it wouldn't be an issue, I crossed my arms and did some thinking. Suddenly, I could hear a short sigh that sounded as if it had been contained.

As I looked up, Yuigahama could be seen biting her lips while slowly shaking her lowered head. She didn't say anything, but that is enough to convey her thoughts.

I shouldn't have said that without proper consideration. This is a mistake that I have repeated so many times.

I took a deep breath and started to convince myself.

"...No, let's try to properly talk to them. They might not understand us, but for now, let's seek out people that we're familiar with."

"Ok."

Yuigahama nodded and answered with a smile.

The situation we're in right now is a product of my mistakes.

Which is why I should at least avoid making the same mistakes over and over.

I have to find a method fundamentally different from what I've used in the past.

4-3

As we contacted the people we could think of, time flowed by leisurely. The scenery seen from Saize's window will soon be dyed with twilight. Although it's still far from the peak hour for leaving work, pedestrians could already be seen flooding into the train station.

After receiving replies from the people I asked to meet up with, we waited for them to come. During this period we decided to have an early dinner.

Yuigahama could be seen brawling with the pizza in front of her, whenever she says a 'gambateh', an eerie noise could be heard right after. Is she bad at using this round pizza cutter? Lots of screeching sounds could be heard as the toothed blade clashed fiercely against the pan.

Is she finally done? Yuigahama sighed and handed over a piece of pizza that had this weird shape that I can't describe.

"For you, Hikki."

"Uhm, thank you."

But then again I won't make any unnecessary remarks towards the shape of the pizza. I'm not in a position to complain after having someone else cut for me, and Saize's pizza is good no matter what the shape or size.

"Do you want some chili sauce?"

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

I picked up a bottle of chili sauce placed at the center of the table, squeezed it two to three times, and then munched on the pizza that now tasted even better.

After a while, the side dishes, Doria rice, pasta, and salad were served. They'll be another meat dish coming up soon. This set meal felt more sumptuous than I imagined, I should inform Komachi that I won't be having dinner when I come home later.

While I tapped my phone, Yuigahama used her fork and knife like a pair of chopsticks, asking me while picking up food:

"Do you want any salad?"

"Just a bit, no tomatoes. And uhhh, you can take out all the prawns. I'll be full with just the meat."

"Really!? That's great! By the way, eat some tomatoes too, it's not good to be picky with food."

"Ah, it's not that, I just tend to feel uncomfortable every time I eat tomatoes, I can't stand their slimy texture."

"Eh... but that's what makes them taste good."

Seeming to be more skillful at separating salad as compared to cutting pizza, Yuigahama swiftly took out my share and arranged them on my plate. I nodded to express my gratitude, took it over and thanked her before eating.

Though... the lettuce is covered with the sticky juice of the tomatoes...I shoved it into my mouth with my eyes closed and swallowed it almost instantly without even chewing.

Aha, now there shouldn't be any other vegetables with tomato essence stuck on them... As I opened my eyes, Yuigahama could be seen placing her hands over her cheeks, happily looking at me.

"You look just like a child."

She gleefully made that comment as if she's teasing me, she then switched over into a more mature smile. This girl, who was supposed to be the same age as me, for some reason looked at me in a way that resembled an older sister. My eyes felt uneasy, looking left and right.

But as I shifted my line of view towards every direction, her gorgeous tea-colored hair that shines like an angel's halo, her big watery eyes, the concave spot on her collarbone, her fingertips that tapped onto the ends of her hair, the lifted corners of her mouth and those glittering lips, her long eyelashes that look like a soft artistic curve, and even her slightly

blushed soft cheeks, everything that enters my view is just so captivating.

"S...some adults dislike tomatoes too..."

Apparently, Hiratsuka-sensei hates tomatoes too ... after saying this, I lowered my head. Is this me feeling shy or embarrassed? Either way, I can't directly look at Yuigahama's face.

I looked up and turned my head towards the air conditioner with a "Speaking of which ~ did this shop set their air conditioner a little too strong?" kind of look and let out a long breath.

Soon after, a familiar large figure appeared in the distance.

Wearing a trench coat, leather gloves, and glasses, it wouldn't look weird for the current season. But the way he looks around while standing at the entrance makes him look super suspicious. The way he's acting so suspiciously, however, is what made him easier to recognize, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru, the self-proclaimed Kengo.

As Zaimokuza noticed me raising my hand, the uneasy expression on his face turned into a cheerful one, marching while waving towards us. Like a wild grizzly bear who got tamed all of a sudden...

For some reason, Yuigahama stood up holding onto her bag and moved over to my seat.

"Ahem."

"Huh?"

I took over her bag, As she noticed my confused reaction, Yuigahama said with a displeased face,

"Move over a little."

"Ah, sure..."

After I moved inside, leaving her some space, she then sat directly down.

Why...? Is it that hard to sit beside Zaimokuza? But then again, I don't really like Zaimokuza sitting next to me either, ...but aren't you sitting a little too close to me? I'm feeling super nervous all of a sudden!

"Hachiman, for what reason did you summon me here?"

After taking a deep breath, Zaimokuza made two unnecessarily loud coughs and sat in front of me.

The way Zaimokuza acted like his usual self made me feel a sense of relief.

Alright, calm down. Keep my breath going.

"For now, let's wait for everyone else to come. For the time being, spot the differences."

I handed over the children's menu to Zaimokuza. The front cover and rear cover of this children's menu seemed to have the same painting, but in fact, there are some differences between them. It's a strategy to make children stay quiet by letting them find these differences while waiting for their food, which makes this menu a popular feature.

"Oh!... This looks kinda difficult."

Zaimokuza immediately started to work on it as he took over the menu. Such casual treatment feels pretty nice and really comfortable... Before I realized it my face had softened and a random idea came to my mind.

"Bruh, if we are still single by the age of 70, let's live together at a nursing home, shall we?"

"What's this, some new proposal tactic? I'm pretty confident that we could buy a single 'men only' kind of apartment unit. We can uhhh, watch anime and play table games together every day."

Zaimokuza didn't even bat an eye, staying focused on the menu, while answering me casually.

Yuigahama whispered "The fu...", sounding pretty disgusted by our conversation.

I felt my phone vibrating. Probably the other person that I contacted, Saika Totsuka. As I was about to pick up the call, he had already arrived.

"Hachiman."

Is it because we're in a public area? He called out my name in a lower tone than usual.

As I looked up, Totsuka walked over while carrying a tennis bag. He's wearing a coat over his usual sportswear and his neck is covered with what seems to be a hand-woven muffler. Did he rush here right after his club activity ended? His clothes look disheveled, his breathing sounds rapid, and his cheeks look pretty red. This felt refreshing and I laughed unconsciously as I raised up my arm.

My smile froze instantly.

Standing behind Totsuka, a familiar black blueish ponytail could be seen swaying. Wearing a black coat and checkered scarf, those daringly uncovered long legs, and the big shopping bags that look incompatible with this clothing. Seeming unhappy yet trying her best to cover it up by showing a casual expression, Kawasomething nodded at us, to which I too nodded in response.

I then immediately whispered into Yuigahama's ear,

"Didn't I tell you to invite someone who's easy to communicate with?"

"And you invited chuuni here!"

Complained Yuigahama with a pouting face while keeping her voice down. But, it's not like I can do anything about this situation.

"Well, yeah, this erm, um, well, it's true that they're hard to communicate with but..."

... But really, for my case, there's actually not a lot of people who I can talk to, right?

Zaimokuza, Totsuka, and even Kawasaki, however, are people we are actually familiar with, which makes them easier to talk to. If it's someone

like Miura for example, I definitely can't get myself to say anything in front of them.

Totsuka walked over in small steps and sat down lightly beside Zaimokuza, while Kawasaki pulled over a chair to sit down on, crossed her legs, and faced us sideways.

"Saki-chan and Saika-chan, thank you for coming. Do you want something to eat?"

Yuigahama handed the menu to them, Totsuka then replied with a shy smile:

"Yeah, I would like to... I'm feeling a bit hungry after club activities."

"I'll pass... a drink is enough."

Kawasaki replied briefly. She probably has to go home and prepare dinner, and only decided to join in since she was on the way to pick up her sister Keika. It's better not to waste too much of her time.

I'll begin once Totsuka comes back ... Come to think of it, we haven't asked Zaimokuza if he wants to eat anything. As I looked towards him, Zaimokuza was still staring at the children's menu.

"Nghhhh, there are still seven differences that can't be found..."

Seriously, dude, there's only 10 differences in the menu.

4-4

As I stared at Totsuka rolling up the pasta and sending it into his mouth, I began to talk after he seemed to finish chewing.

"First of all, I would like to apologize for calling you out so suddenly, and thank you all for coming, thank you very much."

I bowed my head down and thanked them sincerely. Argh, it feels embarrassing to act so earnestly. I'm afraid to look up into the expressions of these three people, so I continued to lower my head for a while.

Then, a satisfying "ohoho" sound, the gentle sensation of someone nodding, and a soft troubled sigh could be felt in the air, alongside a happy, relieved sensation traveling into my ears. Knowing whose reactions were whose, it no longer made sense for me to continue bowing.

After making two coughs to drive off my shyness, I continued speaking,

"I have unfortunate news to share."

"Ok."

Zaimokuza adjusted his posture, showing me an unnecessary "I'm listening" kind of expression, Totsuka sat nervously while setting his back straight, and Kawasaki is still leaning her head aside with a tired face.

"Do you guys know about the school prom?"

"Huh, no I didn't, but I will now."

As he answered, Zaimokuza took out his mobile phone. Searching for something after being asked about it, for an otaku this guy is actually pretty impressive. I was expecting him to ask me back about the prom, and I was prepared to answer him "Just Google it, see this rectangular

device thingy in front of you? Use it. I mean, DoN't YoU GuYS HaVe pHonES?" instead he just saved me the trouble.

I'm guessing that Zaimokuza is done researching proms, as he is now showing a disgusted and wretched face while staring at his phone.

"Erggg... what is this, the kind of activity that only exists to satisfy the vile desires of normies, giving them nothing but short term happiness!? And those goddang chads will use this experience as something to brag on to their normie community once they enter university and be like 'Yooooo we organized a prom during high school, see how lit we are fam?' To brag about themselves, showing people how cool their high school life was, altering a few details here and there, those sociable bastards..."

Zaimokuza slammed his phone onto the table, Totsuka took a peek at its contents, looking intrigued. Kawawhatshername didn't say anything like "can I have a look", but the way she glanced over seems to be telling me that.

"This prom will be organized in our school... but we decided to oppose it."

Just as I finished my sentence, Zaimokuza made a loud slap on his knee and said,

"Which means that we're the anti-prom group, right!?"

"... Well, something like that."

"Yes! We're the anti-prom bois!"

Did you make that term up when you were searching for it just now... Please don't use some random term you came up with so confidently... Seeing how agitated Zaimokuza's acting, the volume of my voice suddenly went down a few levels.

"Well...that's...erm, yeah, that's kinda what we're doing."

"What!? No!?"

Yuigahama shouted at me with a shocked face. She’s loud, she shouted really loud. Both of your voices are seriously loud. And can you please not turn around, I could almost feel something grazing over my elbow. Also, please stop shaking my arm.

What's going on here!? As I was being shaken, I looked around the shop. Fortunately, there aren't a lot of people here. Now that the tables nearby to ours are still empty, I should probably discuss it with Yuigahama in private...

"Sorry, can you give us a minute?"

"Take your time."

After receiving Zaimokuza's permission, I turned around to Yuigahama. Then lifted up my hands up to my chest, making a push-out hand gesture. Seeing my signal, Yuigahama unwillingly stood up.

I too stood up. After making a brief apology to Totsuka and Kawasaki, I led Yuigahama to a different table.

Yuigahama looked at me full of suspicion, grabbed onto my shoulder as soon as we sat down, and said quietly,

"What was that about? We are going to organize a prom, right?"

"Yes yes. That is the plan... But, it's kinda hard to say it now, you saw Zaimo's reaction just now, didn't you... It's hard to explain it to him without making his mood calm down."

As I glanced over, Zaimokuza could be seen blabbering over negative rumors about proms. Totsuka was just nodding obediently and Kawasaki was completely ignoring them. It's like I'm looking at these three strangers who just happened to be drinking together at the bar.

Eyebrows raised, Yuigahama said with her voice low,

"Eh... But it’s definitely inappropriate to not tell the truth."

"Yeah, I'll tell them... But if anything goes wrong, do help me out a little. Please."

I closed my palms together and lowered my head. Yuigahama then let out a troubled sigh,

"... It can't be helped, then."

Yuigahama smiled as she was standing up. I also stood up and walked towards our original seats.

Did Zaimokuza finally calm down after all that fussing? He's now looking at us with very eager eyes. I made another cough and said,

"Everyone, I have another unfortunate thing to announce."

"Ok."

Zaimokuza sat upright again.

"Look... we are indeed opposing the prom, but not as some kind of anti-prom group. The prom will still be held."

"What!?"

Although Zaimokuza tilted his head, he's still showing a serious expression. Totsuka and Kawasaki both reacted in a similar way. Well, it can't be helped for them to react in such a way, since this does sound pretty confusing. While I was thinking about how to elaborate further, Yuigahama immediately followed up on my statement,

“Yukinon and Iroha chan are organizing the prom, but the parents and the school demanded that they exercise self-restraint. So we are considering presenting them with a different prom proposal, something like that.”

"....Huh."

Kawasaki’s reply sounded as if she was uninterested, however, her eyes widened with a glint of surprise, is it because she’s hearing the term 'self-restraint' for the first time?

"Yukinoshita and Iroha's plan has been rejected by the parents association. Even if they make amendments to that proposal, it will most probably get kicked back again. Therefore, we plan to present them with

a second proposal. With the existence of two proposals, we should be able to force a situation where they'll have to select either one of them."

"Is Yukinoshita aware of this?"

Although her tone sounded cold, I could see the worries in Kawasaki's eyes. I shook my head.

"No, she doesn't know... to be exact, I did not tell her. Sorry, please don't talk about this to others. The plan won't work if it's exposed."

Kawasaki looked at me in disbelief. Although not obvious, Totsuka also seemed to be confused. Only Zaimokuza is tapping on the table with his hand while nodding.

"Uhm uhm, a double bind... under a premise huh, so you're suggesting to them multiple options to choose from, and pull off this psychological trick where they'll act under the impression that they must choose..."

"Yes, something like that."

Only this, however, won't be enough to induce an answer from the parents, so it's not the full picture, but that is indeed our intention.

Sounding as if he's been sorting out all this information, Totsuka, who had been nodding silently as he was listening, said with a low voice,

"Which means that you'll still be opposing the prom one way or another."

"... Indeed. So I hope that you can help us out with the planning of the prom..."

I found it difficult to convey my next sentence, so my mouth froze half open.

As I stayed silent for a few moments, Totsuka sat up straight staring at me. Showing me an impression that felt different from his usual serenity and gentleness, a slightly prestigious look.

"Hachiman, allow me to verify something first. Otherwise, this conversation will just end up with loose ties like it did before. I don't like it."

Even though he sounded shy, a strong will could be sensed from his words. This feeling that I never expected Totsuka to have left me at a loss for words. But now that he's said it, it is true that I never actually talked about this to anyone. No, I didn't even attempt to have a discussion from the beginning, simply allowing things to end abruptly. From their point of view, I've probably acted very dishonestly and irresponsibly.

"What exactly do you want?"

Not really understanding what's the intent behind this question, I asked him through my eyes. Totsuka then scratched his cheeks and said,

"The way Hachiman said it just doesn't sound like you really want to organize a prom. Which made me feel concerned about it...the fact that you're hiding this from Yukinoshita-san doesn't sound right to me either. Is there another goal that Hachiman wants to achieve here?"

"No, I..."

As I was about to explain using the words I just came up with, Totsuka's strong eyes stopped me from doing so.

"Sorry Hachiman, I know that it might be hard to say out loud with everyone being here, but we really want to properly understand you."

I couldn't speak for a while.

Everyone in front of me is staring here. Either with their backs straight, or leaning sideways, or seeming troubled from such an atmosphere.

As I was figuring out what to say, my wavering sight landed on Yuigahama's worried face.

"Hikki..."

I could feel my cuff being pulled by her hand under the table. Feeling her warmth, I closed my eyes.

Yeah, I know. This time I should really properly say it.

This is not the first time I've asked them for help. Although the lineup of people this time is somewhat different, the situation is the same. Back then, I kept everything hidden from them, using others as an excuse, for the sake of relying on their gentleness.

But it's different now. If it feels embarrassing, but at least right now, I can tell them all about it, with language that contains no lies.

Even they might find it unreasonable and illogical, and they might not find it to be true. But, it's my words, the words that are not borrowed nor temporary.

"Truth be told, I don't really care about what happens to the prom... Yukinoshita wants to achieve it with her own strength. So she doesn't want me to help."

I opened my eyes slowly.

"Even so, I still want to make their prom a reality... that's what I thought."

After struggling hard to finish my sentence, my eyes lined up with Totsuka's bright smile as he nodded in approval. At this moment, I felt liberated from all these things entangling my chest and let out a breath,

"Generally speaking, I'm planning to come out with a proposal that acts as a sacrificial dummy. A counterfeit designed for the sole purpose of letting the original proposal be approved. Now knowing that everything you do will be in vain, if you are still willing to help please lend me a hand."

I bowed my head and waited for their answers. I could feel the tension on my cuff growing stronger.

The silence itself lasted for only a few seconds. However, no other words could be heard, other than the slightest sighs.

I then heard a deep sigh. As I looked up, Kawasaki showed me a sorry look.

"I'm sorry. As I'm currently helping out Yukinoshita, I can't just leave my current duties aside. Things should always have a proper beginning and end."

Kawasaki's hand that was supporting her chin a while ago is now placed on her thighs. Her body sat straight up, showing an admirable posture.

"...Ah, I understand. In fact, it's good to know that you're helping out Yukinoshita. Their prom is the main event after all. Please."

Kawasaki then turned her head aside and said quickly.

"I would do it even if you didn't ask me to. But...I'll be cheering for you guys from the other side."

After adding that remark with a very low voice, Totsuka looked at Kawasaki with a smile and followed up,

"I have club activities so I won't be available all the time... But if you need any manpower, just let me know. The tennis team will help out. I am the club president, after all."

Totsuka said as he patted his chest. My expression calmed down after hearing his answer.

"Thank you, I'll count on you when the time comes."

Even though the number of active committee members has not increased, it still feels reassuring to know that we have backup in case of an emergency. Most importantly, frank people like those in the tennis club could be very helpful.

I let out a silent breath of relief and I could feel a pat on my cuff. Even though she didn't say anything, the words "This is great." have been conveyed through this action. I didn't look at her face as I was feeling shy, so I only nodded slightly as a response.

There was no major progress. But at least we're moving forward bit by bit... As I had this thought, I looked up, only to see Zaimokuza remaining silent, occasionally making sounds that I can't tell whether it's a murmur or a shriek.

"Hnggghh..."

Just as I thought that he's thinking things through, Zaimokuza suddenly stood up. To which Kawasaki and Totsuka, who both noticed him, stood up and gave way. Zaimokuza then gave them a nod and stepped out with a hand knife pose. As he reached the aisle, he stood straight with his back facing me.

"...Right now it should be the one at west Chiba's Lucky? No, the ACE."

Zaimokuza was seen playing with his phone while saying those words. Feeling weird about his actions, me and Yuigahama looked at each other. Conversing silently with our eyes "What does that mean?" "I don't know". All I could recognize is the name of the game centers he just said. Knowing that I shouldn't leave him that way, I asked,

"Hey uh...Zaimokuza-san? You there?"

As I called out to him, Zaimokuza turned back sideways, with his hands now in both pockets, showing me a cold smile.

"... Well, guess I have no choice."

Even though I know that he was just acting cool, for some reason I find his acting much more convincing than ever before.

No seriously, it's actually pretty cool.

"You need talent, right? Tomorrow, free up your schedule a little. I will contact you."

Once he finished speaking, Zaimokuza walked towards the exit in large steps. The odd yet fascinating sensation made me freeze for a moment. When I came back to my senses, I stood up and told him.

"Sorry, and thank you."

So, Zaimokuza stopped his movements.

"Wait! And hope!"

Zaimokuza could be seen waving his trench coat, both arms stretched out, as he shouted these words. What, bruh? Can you please not do this in a restaurant ... Although, well, it does look pretty cool, to be honest.

Chapter 5: Not usually being aware of it, the closing credits are about to roll.

A day after Zaimokuza's cool proclamation, the promised moment finally came.

As soon as the end of class bell rang, I promptly turned my head back and cast my eyes over to the back corner of the classroom - entering my sight was the typical group centered around Miura. Needless to say, Yuigahama was also part of it.

I breathed out deeply, made up my mind, and then stood up from my seat. Maybe I was a little too fired up - I just created a fuss by pushing back the chair too hard and making a stupid 'grrr' sound as it scrubbed the ground. Yuigahama noticed that sound and looked in my direction. Well, in fact, everybody left in the classroom was looking at me.

That was so embarrassing for me that I just wanted to get to the back of the classroom and dive right into the window glass immediately, till I reached the end of the blue sky. You'd think of it as exciting as 'Grand

Blue' but I was so close to turning the school courtyard into red ocean. [11]

But the embarrassment I suffered wasn't for nothing. Yuigahama immediately picked up her school bag and carried it on her back, waving goodbye to Miura and coming towards me.

"About to get going?"

"Yeah…"

What a relief… to have Yuigahama come up and talk to me. But still, it's kind of embarrassing to be talked to first. Shy egoistic 17-year-old Hachiman! To avoid being stared at further, I quickly left the classroom, followed by Yuigahama walking like a penguin making a "peta-peta" sound with her indoor shoes.

I walked ahead of her by half a step. We came to the same intersection as yesterday, where to the right lies the staircase and to the left the special-purpose building. Yuigahama then poked my back asking,

"What shall we do today?"

"Ah, I heard something from Zaimokuza earlier..."

As I spoke, I took out my smartphone to confirm the meetup location Zaimokuza sent over to me.

Yuigahama leaned her head, jumping back and forth, left and right, as if saying 'let me see it, too'. Hey! That's disturbing but cute yet also annoying, stop jumping stop leaping leave me alone.[12] Just give me a moment and I'll let you see it…. Hence I did.

"Ehh, looks like we are also meeting someone else besides Zaimokuza there."

"Hmm…"

Yuigahama peeked at the screen over my shoulder and blinked her eyes a couple of times. After that, she leaned her head and asked me dubiously,

“... Who else is the Chuunibyou calling?”

I looked outside the window as she asked - no matter how far it goes, the sky stays blue and perfectly clear. There, it seemed that I just saw an illusion of Zaimokuza in a thumbs-up pose. I put on a bitter smile corresponding to my illusion.

“Let’s just trust him for now…”

“Even if you say that with a good face....”

Yuigahama’s uneasy mutter echoed in the corridor.

5-2

Shortly, we arrived at the special-purpose building according to Zaimokuza's message, two floors below the Service Club, which was located on the fourth. Around the corner stood Zaimokuza like a Deva King[13]. He soon noticed the two of us and started waving at us.

"Oh, come here!"

While being waved at, I arrived at the front of a certain classroom.

"This place is…"

Yuigahama opened her mouth in surprise and cast her eyes into the classroom. So did I, before I noticed something too.

I have been to this place before. If I remember it correctly, this is… Ga...Gamer's Research Club, aka Asoken[14]. My memory of this place was vague but I could recollect that I used to play Daifugou (or Daihinmin) here.

"Please come in."[15]

Zaimokuza knocked on the door, yet entered the classroom without waiting for any response. We were bewildered, but we still quickly followed him into the classroom.

Behind the door, there were piles of boxes, books, and packages stacked on top of each other. They looked like intimidating walls standing there, leaving the room looking like a maze. Entering my mind were images of a typical bibliomania's home library and a packed toy shop.

"Hey… is this the Game Club?"

Yuigahama tugged my sleeve and asked. Thanks to her question, I remembered too. Yes yes, this is the Game Club. Ah… Yeah, that's a thing in our school.

As I was thinking that, Zaimokuza ended up walking way ahead of us and was about to disappear amid the tallest pile of books and boxes.

I quickly caught up to him, and there I saw two long desks and two more guys.

Those two guys noticed us and both pushed their glasses up.

“Hello…”

“... Long time no see.”

I felt like I had seen one of them - with that distinctive, fashionable pair of glasses[16]. While I was wondering about his name, Zaimokuza eagerly prepared the steel chairs and laid out the tea and snacks on the table. He placed our chairs facing across from those two glasses guys and then sat down on their side of the table.

“Th.. thanks!”

After Yuigahama expressed her gratitude, Zaimokuza and the two Game Club guys all collectively mumbled: “please have a seat”. Yuigahama quietly and politely pulled out the chair and sat down. In contrast, I sat down on the chair heavily.

“Zaimokuza, are they the so-called ‘helpers’?”

“Positive. They are Mr. Hatano and Mr. Sagami.”

He pointed at the two of them for us, proudly and happily. He smiled so excitingly as he was introducing them to us. Since when did you guys get along with each other so well… I wonder if it’s one of those arcade center friendships. Well, I have zero interest in Zaimokuza’s friendship circle anyways. Whatevs. Now here’s the problem. Which one is Sagami and which one is Hatano…? I stared at them for a while but still failed to match their names to their faces.

“Oh crap, the Sworder-san was actually being serious…”

“Irk! I thought he was definitely joking.”

My guess - Hatano spoke first and the follow-up person looked like Sagami.

Overhearing their secret conversation, it seemed that Zaimokuza already told them about our business here. That makes things easier to explain.

“Let me get straight into it. In opposition to the actual prom, you guys are going to help us with this dummy prom proposal, which will ensure that the actual prom takes place.”

I quickly put my elbows on the table and leaned forward, trying to motivate them. My body language was suggesting ‘Let’s all do our best together!’ to them. Well. The two Game Club guys disinterestedly looked at me.

“Is this guy a moron?”

“Is he making such a big deal just to do something like that? I wonder if there’s something wrong with his brain...”

Hatano was astounded and Sagami looked sympathetic. Zaimokuza seemed happy from the bottom of his heart. He cheerfully straightened his chest up and said,

“That’s right! That’s him, Hikigaya Hachiman! Always using strange, bizarre and unexpected measures to get things done. Stupid! A fool! A jocular fellow![17]”

Shit! These guys really irritated me…! I was about to kick the chair and say goodbye. I couldn’t do so, because Yuigahama was tugging on my jacket sleeve again.

“Hikki, you have to ask them properly…”

I couldn’t say no while being asked by someone acting like a cute kid. But she was right. I was the one asking for the favor. It made sense to ask them nicely and directly for help. I sighed briefly, dismissing all my dissatisfaction and irritation that I had so far and bowed my head down.

“I’m sorry if I had to phrase it this way. I urgently need you guys to help me without asking for compensation. Think of it as volunteering for the

Olympic games. Quit complaining and just help me please."

"He really should feel sorry for saying it that way…"

"Even the politicians choose their way of speech better than him."

Probably because I asked them too directly, Hatano and Sagami leaned their bodies backward and faced upward. That was dismissive. Yuigahama moved her hands in panic, saying "Gaah… he won't listen…" She jumped in and said,

"I'm sorry… Hikki is like this all the time. He's quite unreasonable...!"

What a follow-up rescue that ended up being, that wasn't a good one. They probably couldn't act tough to Yuigahama and only gave ingratiating smiles.

Immediately following that, a meeting between the glasses took place. The glasses sitting in the middle whispered to the glasses sitting to the side,

"... What should we do, then?"

"Mmmh, I'm against helping him!"

For some reason, it came from Zaimokuza, who sat on the other side. Wait, what? Why are you against me… The glasses who was whispered to at raised his hand languorously and asked,

"Hmmm… we actually don't want the prom to take place to begin with."

When he said this, the other two glasses nodded in agreement.

Same... I know your feelings quite well… I was thinking about saying that, but no! I couldn't let myself retreat and surrender now.

Zaimokuza, who had even worse communication abilities than I do, somehow managed to ask help from those who used to make fun of him. Look at how much he sacrificed for me! So I couldn't just destroy this skinny connection that he made for my sake. To repay his precious sacrifice, I needed to somehow convince those two to hop on… Otherwise, I would feel really sorry for Zaimokuza after his death - as a

ghost he would probably cry regrettably for all the sacrifices that he made today. At the very least, I want him to rest in peace.

Now is the time for me to get serious for real. I made up my mind to persuade them patiently and wholeheartedly.

I seized everyone's attention with a couple of coughs. I began my sentence in a heavy sounding voice as if I was trying to cover up the secrets that I was about to say,

"... None of my following words shall leave this room - we were actually asked to exercise 'self-restraint' with regard to the prom event."

Suddenly, upon hearing unexpected information, the glasses all went silent immediately. I had no idea why Zaimokuza was also silent. Hey, didn't I tell you about this yesterday already?

Well, whatever. Let me get everyone further hyped up by going into more detailed explanations.

"On the other hand, it's 'self-restraint' after all, which means it's possible for us to force the prom to take place anyway… Actually, that's almost definitely going to be the case. If that happens, it will probably end up being an in-house pre-prom like what happened before.

"Wait, no. What if I just simply refuse to attend?"

I nodded my head in response to the counterargument raised by Sagami (or Hatano, whatever) showing my great sympathy. I raised my hand, suggesting,

"Just be patient and hear me out first. Think about it for a second. If you don't show up at the prom, then you probably wouldn't have the courage to show up at the Coming of Age ceremonies or any alumni reunion events later in your life."[18]

Think about the alumni reunions at the age of 30. Those who didn't attend the Coming of Age ceremonies together with classmates or didn't attend the alumni reunions right after graduation have a zero percent chance of showing up at alumni reunions at a later age - verified by my own research. For those who are courageous enough to attend it, you'll

see that half of the attendees have already gotten married, and you'll even notice that some of their kids are already attending elementary schools. That hurts one's feelings - verified by my dad's research. The attending fee would probably be around 5000 yen. Looks like the accountant would be happily at ease if he/she receives Higuchi Ichiyou bills rather than bills with other face values - Teenagers Vying for Tops. [19]

However, the reaction from the Game Club still didn't change after they heard my words.

"Ehh, I still think it's okay not to attend anyway..."

"I felt like the past me probably thought that way at one point…"

Expecting the reply, I said that immediately and cast my gaze afar.

"Just think about it and imagine…"

And then I started storytelling like John Lennon.

"It's the morning of Come of Age Day. A few days ago, you just went out shopping with your dad like you haven't done in a few years. You are wearing a new suit that you bought with your dad for job hunting and interviews."

"He just started talking suddenly out of the blue…."

Sitting next to me, Yuigahama sighed with amazement. I tried to stop her with a hand gesture and continued anyway. I did a little trick of touching my collar and added some emotions into my words.

"And then, with the expectation that you are going to drink with everyone, your mom hands you a 10000 yen bill. Both of your parents are so proud of your maturity and their eyes are wet, while not bothering to see you off by walking you to the doorstep...."

I narrated so vehemently and waved my hands while wearing a mom-like smile. Seeing this, Zaimokuza and the Game Club two all showed sickening faces.

“Ah, that’s so tough…”

That’s Zaimokuza in his puberty! A bad guy who made a woman - his mom, though - cry was confessing his sin and keeping his head down silently. Perhaps both Sagami and Hatano both were thinking about their parents. They both had their mouths shut.

Now it’s the time for the final attack to take place - I poured more passion into my words.

“You then spend the next hour like this - you hold that 10000 yen bill delightfully, go to the arcade center, use up almost all that money, eat an extra-extra-large ice cream at a Happy Club, and if your stomach feels too cold then you then swallow a lot of miso soup to make it feel warmer. In the middle of the night when your house is supposed to have the lights out, your mom doesn’t bother to wake up to welcome you back. She asks if you had a good time and you reply to her mumbling like ‘eh, it was okay.’ She then weeps and gently wipes her eyes, saying ‘...Ah, Yoshiteru is already a grown man.’”

“Me!? It was me!? You were talking about me!?”

“Sworder-san, so tough for you…”

Sagami and Hatano both patted Zaimokuza’s shoulder to comfort him.

I peeked at them without directly looking at them and said the following vehemently,

“Therefore, we shall learn in order to avoid ending up like him and learn the wisdom to get things done. I’d say the prom is the perfect learning opportunity to train us. “

As I finished talking, the guys all sighed deeply. I wore a smile on my face and continued,

“Nevertheless, we cannot make the prom as fired up and hyped up as much as we want it to be. It’s too hard to do so. Therefore, we need to stay low and serious… and put on a carefully-crafted prom that’s positioned at the sweet-spot to earn more experience.”

As I finished talking again, the three glasses glanced at each other and began their glasses meeting again.

“That guy sounds like he has a point.”, “When he brought up the parents, it made me feel rough too…”, “He seemed that he did it pretty well.”, “Right, that’s what irritated me the most! He certainly didn’t look like that kind of person…”, “Hey, Sworder-san your face is too close. You are choking me”, “This distance is unacceptable as an image.”, “So, what shall we do, then?”, “Hmm, let me think…”

Yuigahama apathetically looked at their secret conversation. She looked really tired from her face - sorry about all this…

Shortly afterward, the Glasses Summit was about to reach its conclusion. The three pondered for a while. Considering their immediate rejection before, my persuasion certainly worked.

“This isn’t really a way to say thank you, but starting from next year, I will collect your suggestions and feedback and promise to you that a prom that’s acceptable to you guys will be held. I will try my best to realize this promise. So, please lend me a hand.”

I made a final push and brought up a benefit that’s not really a benefit, to be honest. To make them ‘feel’ merit from it, I bowed my head down.

After a moment of silence, someone spoke up politely.

“Hmm, is that okay? … Isn’t next year the time when you all graduate?”

“Ah, well. To be more accurate, I meant starting from the next-next prom.”

As I raised my head, I saw one of the Game Club members who looked like Sagami from the shape of his glasses. He put on a sulky face, sighed briefly and said,

“... In that case, I’ll offer my help”

“Wait, wait, seriously?”

In reaction to Sagami's words, both Zaimokuza and Hatano resounded together. And then Sagami put on a bitter, yet determined expression and exclaimed,

"I want to first defeat and get rid of the shame that resides in my own family."

"Eh?"

I tilted my head after hearing his a-little-bit-unexpected reasoning to ask for further elaboration. Sagami then starting explaining in a voice, as if it were holding a grudge,

"My sister is that type of person who will certainly come in and intervene with the event. So next year it might end up like that anyway. In that case, I'd like to intervene in advance and prevent her from getting the opportunity."

"Hmmm…."

As I was listening to him, I looked at Sagami's face carefully and noticed… They really look alike indeed. Yuigahama next to me also exclaimed quietly with a little 'ahh..'.

"Ah, Sagami, you are THAT person's younger brother, right…"

The moment I said it, Sagami's face twisted, showing a very disgusting expression. Ah, that face made them look so similar… Um, well, with her being the sister, he is definitely living a tough life. Um um, I understand.

"Shame within the family… I can sympathize with you. Next year, my sister will also be attending this high school. I cannot withstand the shame when I think of the moment when my sister sees a pathetic me at school and starts feeling ashamed and embarrassed. Just imagining whether my kind, adorable sister would get hurt in her heart makes me feel extra painful."

"Is that the case you are referring to…"

As I explained with my eyes wet, Yuigahama lowered her shoulders with a little surprise on her face. Well, don't worry about Komachi. Back in middle school, we both acted like we were complete strangers at school, even though we had the same ahoge. (that lock of hair sticking up from their heads)

Speaking of which, Sagami Minami helped my argument in an unexpected way. My gratitude expressed: thank you for everything from the time we met.

And the other glasses… Hatano, who was finally able to be identified. I looked at him as he took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses.

"To be honest I don't really care… But yeah, when I graduate, I don't want to be looked at and thought of as inferior to others and being sympathized by someone who misunderstands me and looks down on me. Thinking about that irritates me. So count me in!"

"Really!?"

I almost reacted in ecstasy. Yet Hatano squinted his eyes and stared at me,

"However, can you really put on a prom that all of us can accept?"

Speaking of which, Hatano, looking at his way of speaking and his eye contact, they all look kind of rotten and thus very good-looking to me! A little bit impressed by this guy, I then tried to act like a Senpai and said,

"Ah, that's not a problem. There's no way that there will be enough personnel to arrange the prom. So next year, you guys can create and arrange another prom plan together, yourselves. DIY it! To put it in practice, I shall dogeza in front of Isshiki and lick her shoes, if necessary."[20]

"Dogeza… that's surprising even to me."

"Licking her shoes is the more disgusting part, okay! Just saying, I don't think you need to go that far to get Iroha-chan to listen to your request."

Saying that with full confidence, Zaimokuza was caught by surprise. On the other hand, Yuigahama already seemed used to it, being disappointed at first but soon calmly returning to normal conversation. Nevertheless, both Hatano and Sagami still looked at me in disgust… As I was thinking that, both of them redirected their focus to something else…

“Isshiki…”

“Iroha…”

Murmured one after the other, both of them looking at each other, and then turned their faces to me at once.

“Are you referring to THAT Isshiki Iroha?”

“There shouldn't be a second one, right… Maybe, I don’t know.”

The Isshiki Iroha that I know of, is the President of the Student Council, the manager of the Soccer Club, the No.1 naughtily cute underclassman kouhai. I do not believe there is a second Isshiki Iroha in our school.

“The worst… The worst woman ever...”

“Isn’t she the asshole bitch that owns the night pool annual pass… having a boyfriend who’s also the CEO of an IT company, only thinking about looking good on Instagram, indulging in luxury cosmetics brands and a party girl?”

Hatano grabbed his head with both hands and Sagami fixed his stare at me without moving his eyes. Huh, what kind of image did you leave among your classmates, Ms. Irohasu? I have to acknowledge it. Even Yuigahama showed a bitter smile on her face. Nevertheless, to defend an underclassman’s fame as an upperclassman, I have to correct them now.

“Well, that image is almost correct but all the rumors are fake news. Her personality is indeed kind of like *that* but she is, in fact, a good person.”

However, my explanation didn’t seem convincing to Sagami and Hatano, who shook their bodies simultaneously.

“But she looked at us as if we’re trash.”

“No. She didn’t even bother to look, just like we never existed…”

“It was so scary... Little ghost, there’s a little ghost here…”[21]

For some reason even Zaimokuza began trembling as well, mumbling something unconsciously. That’s incorrect guys, it’s actually called ‘little demon’.

“... in that case, you guys *have* no choice but to do it now. Maybe you don’t know it yet, but...”

I shook my shoulders as I told them. Yuigahama nodded at me, signaling for me to continue with a gentle smile. Therefore, I also decided to put a smile over one side of my lips, raise my voice, and properly tell them the good side of Isshiki Iroha.

Hence, I prayed that people’s misunderstandings about her will eventually get cleared up, even by just a little bit.

“.... that scum and hopeless part of her will eventually become part of her habits, but contrastingly, it’s kind of cute in a way.”

Then all three Glasses Club members mumbled respectively “his levels are high”, “makes sense”, “understandable”, which are all compliments. Let’s all stand up and high five for being comrades who reached the door to the truth of the new world. The atmosphere turned to ‘I wish you happiness and cheers to celebrate our tight bonding’.

Yet suddenly, I sensed a slight chill running down my back.

“Hikki-, you looked so sweet and lenient towards Iroha-chan...”

“Eh?”

My ahoge radar was already beeping in response, but I was too scared to look to the side.

5-3

After going through some difficulties, I successfully welcomed the two from the Game Club aboard.

I have no idea how high I should set my expectations for those two but I cherished the free labor that I managed to obtain. Regardless of whether they are capable or incapable of doing things, as long as I make them work their asses off my attack power will surely rise to a considerably higher level.

Now here came the real problem.

First, we have to create the proposal, and then reach the step where we can debate with it.

So now, bearing in mind that we needed to go against Yukinoshita's proposal, we finally began to conceive our own proposal.

"Ok. Let's begin our proposal meetingggggg...Hmm, the idea is that we need to create a proposal that's more prominent and flashier than the previous prom proposal."

The air froze immediately and nobody followed me up. Only Yuigahama's aimless handclaps resonated in the room, but that soon disappeared.

I didn't put too many concrete thoughts into my words, but I was merely trying to grope for a way in the dark fog. After all, nobody here, other than Yuigahama, is actually interested in the prom proposal.

"First of all, does anybody here want to do anything?"

I bet no, too… I asked and the answer was zero, as I expected. As I was thinking that, Yuigahama raised her hand up high.

"Here! Here! Here!"

"...Yes, Yuigahama-san!"

“Stalls, I want them to be there!”

“Okay, I see”

No objection or denial. I wrote down the suggestion on the whiteboard. ‘Do you know that there’s a thing called brainstorming…’ Tamanawa spoke to me in my imagination.

“Anything else…?”

“Yes! Yes!”

Of course, following my question, Yuigahama raised her hand immediately.

“..... Alright, Yuigahama-san”

“Fireworks! I like both seeing and playing with them.”

“That’ll pass!”

Having agreement and sympathy in mind, I carefully recorded this precious suggestion on the whiteboard. “Preach it!” Orimoto shouted out in my imagination.

“And then…?”

“Yes!”

“.....Yuigahama.”

“Putting on a campfire or something that creates memories!”

“.... are you briefing to us your summer vacation memories? Well whatever, it’s okay.”

I kept writing stuff on the whiteboard anyway, seeing it almost turning into an elementary school kid’s illustrated diary.

As I cast my ‘wet’ eyes to Yuigahama, she played with her hair bun and averted her eyes away from me, finding and mumbling various excuses.

"... But as long as I think about fun and enjoyable things, they just irresistibly come up in my mind."

When I saw her getting shy with a flush on her cheeks, I became a little bit embarrassed, too. Doing so, all other guys turned their faces from me as if they were about to spit out sugar from their mouths. I can't bear this.

I coughed out loud to seize their attention and continued our discussion.

"Now Hatano. You seem to have another suggestion."

"Nope. To begin with, I don't even want the prom to happen… also, what the hell are you trying to show me?"

Hatano muttered while biting his tongue. Hey, I can't hear you, bro! Speak out loud with your stomach!

"Sagami the Younger Brother, in other words, something that your sister would like and enjoy."

"I do not want to think about that."

After hearing the words that he didn't want to hear, Sagami Jr. immediately shut his mouth up with his head dangling. Yes, little by little it got easier for me to distinguish the two - the one with a terrible attitude is Hatano, and the one that's poor with his sister is Sagami.

Let me see who's left… As I turned my eyes, Zaimokuza stroke a serious pose and said heavily,

"Cosplay... Is good to go, right?"

"Ah, like a Halloween Cosplay? Sounds sweet!"

"Phmff..."

In reaction to the delightful Yuigahama, Zaimokuza wore a bitter and sorrowful smile. Yep, I bet the impression of cosplay is quite different in Zaimokuza's mind vs in Yuigahama's mind. Well, it was not a terribly unreasonable suggestion. I noted it on the whiteboard, anyway.

However, as I scanned through all the items on the board, I felt like something was a bit off.

“We are probably still missing something...”

In addition to the suggestions coming from Yuigahama, I also added a couple more ideas from my Hachiman Memo, including “Singing songs”, “Perform a play”, “Make an address”. Still, I reckoned something was missing, but importantly, ‘can we still call it a prom?’ questions like this came out in my mind.

While I tilted my head a little bit, Sagami and Hatano’s cold giggles stroked my ears.

“It’s meaningless to just recklessly fight against the old prom proposal.”

“Knowing that nobody would do this, we need to first think about why nobody does it.”

“Your remarks are too pertinent…”

Ah, come to think of it. These guys were the mean and annoying otaku people. I could sense it vaguely, so I wasn’t able to raise any counterarguments against them. Grrr… was the only voice I can make.

I flipped the whiteboard to the blank side, just as a way to switch our mood. I then crossed my arms to try to come up with more ideas…

“Hey, Hikki-”

As I turned around, Yuigahama raised her hand timidly.

“Yes, Yuigahama-san.”

“To put it more blatantly, we all don’t really even know about proms that much. I don’t think we can come up with something more amazing than the Yukinoshita team.”

“...ah, you are right.”

“So, why not make the scale of the event even bigger? Not just within our school, but also reaching out to other High Schools”

Yuigahama raised her arms to embrace the air above her, moving her hands accordingly.

“... I see, I see.”

Both Yuigahama and I know the upper bound of our mobilization within our school. We know the capacity. Knowing this, it’s very hard to conceive and create a prom proposal that falls under the capacity of high schoolers. Both knowledge and common sense are annoying - once internalizing them, we ended up getting trapped by them. For these reasons, we ended up drawing ideas that fall on the extension lines of things such as school festivals, Christmas, Halloween and summer break. Moreover, the Yukinoshita team has already filled in more concrete plans on top of the old prom proposal. If we try to surpass them, it would definitely turn out to be an amalgamation of ridiculous ideas.

“... changing our way of thinking and trying another perspective...”

Getting fussed, disoriented, and troubled, it’s about time to go back to the starting line.

In our case, we should return our focus to why we wanted to create this new dummy proposal - one of the reasons being to go against Yukinoshita, but that’s not our end goal.

Our goal is to actualize the prom, and before that, we need to eliminate all the barriers that block it.

That's to say, the foes that we need to turn against are the parents.

Hence I wrote down “Anti-parents” on the whiteboard and tapped it with the back of my fingers.

“This is it. How do we make some of the parents notice our dummy plan, then try to terminate it, and then hopefully yield to the alternative plan? We need to think about this.”

Therefore, we should keep the core of our proposal untouched and unchanged, and then shift to easy ways to upscale the prom in its appearance. And then the easiest way to upscale the prom is to bring up

the headcount of participation. Yuigahama's suggestion to bring in the other schools would be such a great move.

I kept pondering for a while, and then quickly wrote down "Chiba-Kaihin Area Elementary-Middle-High School Joint Prom Event" on the whiteboard. Zaimokuza tilted his head in 'umu-umu' agreement.

"Are we even able to do such a thing?"

"We are not."

"Ehhh…"

Hearing my immediate response, Zaimokuza voiced his confusion. I waved my finger and laughed with a 'hmph hmph'.

"It doesn't matter if we can actually do it. The thing that matters is to convince others that we are going to do it."

We cannot make our proposal look like a ridiculous joke. It's important that it needs to tie into reality.

Therefore, we need to blend in some flavors of reality, or reality-like facts to our proposal.

"For now, let's just put up some 'Notices' around other schools nearby. Make it a concrete fact that's already happened, and then we naturally guide the parents to put their guard up against it."

It doesn't matter if the plan gets realized. In the form of distributing 'Notices' or 'Confirmations of Action', we can use them as evidence and then fabricate the hype. It's the same thing as PR for those TV animation projects. Bringing up the news doesn't necessarily imply that the project will be actualized. There are TV anime series that were announced but were never actually produced or aired! The anime industry is indeed just like a slaughterhouse[22].

"I will let Komachi know at some point, as for other schools…"

I was waiting for a follow-up, and well, clearly nobody wanted to help me out… As I crossed my arms in annoyance, Yuigahama openly waved

her hands and made another suggestion,

“What about Kaihin-Sougou HS? Remember we had joint events with them before? That might make them easier to talk to.”

“Properly setting up the dialogue might still be difficult. However, it certainly feels more realistic since we’ve had past experiences together…”

On one hand, it’s very difficult to establish a constructive conversation with Tamanawa, the President of their Student Council, and that’s not even mentioning moving forward. On the other hand, we aren’t aiming to actually make the joint prom happen. To pose like we’re planning to do so, we just need to show that we've indeed carried out conversations with them. Having this in mind, in a way Tamanawa from Kaihin-Sougou is the *best* candidate of all. After all, he was famous for holding conferences without any concrete content but rather embellishments and decorations from the outside.

“... what about other schools? For example, the middle schools that each of you graduated from… Could you try talking to them as well?”

“Err… I don’t want to do it.”

Sagami said clearly without any incentive or motivation, whereas Hatano blatantly put on an unwilling face and as for Zaimokuza…, he just faked that he didn’t hear what I said at all. Ok, I feel you all. So I won’t force you guys.

“It won’t be necessary. It’s okay if it’s only just Kaihin-Sougou HS hopping aboard with us. We will only need to borrow the names from other schools.”

“He’s talking about borrowing names from others again…”

Yuigahama’s eyes turned a little sharper. Taking her hint, I wore a bitter smile and changed my phrasing,

“Sorry for my bad phrasing. Let’s make a list of candidate schools that we want to negotiate with. If we keep that list, we could end up

negotiating with these schools eventually. We want others to mistakenly think that we are actually carrying out the negotiations."

The aim of our dummy prom plan is to troll parents into treating it as a big problem and thus creating another chance for the legitimacy of the prom to be questioned. At that time, our Team Stalking Horse (Team Dummy Plan) would leave the parents with an impression of being uncontrollable, which would naturally lead the parents into pessimistically supporting the controllable Yukinoshita's plan.

As I was talking, Sagami's face became more serious,

"When you mentioned disseminating the information to attract their attention.... of course, it's going to be over the Internet, right?"

"Indeed. By a simple cost-benefit analysis, I surmise that's the best plan."

In fact, the inception of those protests against the prom took place on those SNSs as well. Conversely, it's not hard to conclude that they also secretly checked things online. With regard to the dummy prom plan, we do not need to waste our energy spreading the news to all students. We only need to leak the news to those few lousy parents. In this sense, our labor cost of promotion is actually a lot less than those of Yukinoshita's team, except that we have to carefully craft our plans to intentionally pick the best timing and way to leak it to the parents. In any case, this is something that we need to think about at a much later stage.

For now, we need to discuss the basic stuff in more detail.

"First of all, we need to create an official SNS account and an official website for our prom plan… and then, I guess we need to decide on an organization name for us…"

As I spoke, I wrote down "Looking for Names💗" on the whiteboard.

'Why the heart mark…' Yuigahama and the Game Club guys murmured among themselves. Eh, somehow I wanted to have it there… Only Zaimokuza didn't seem to care about it too much and only rubbed his chin and leaned his head to the side.

"Alright, I guess to make it sound like an Anime Production Committee?"[23]

“Yeah, something like that, since we can't just borrow names from the Student Council… Let’s consider names that sound effective and promising, or we would just be parasitical by relying on a signboard that seemingly belongs to the Student Council.”

The most effective way to acquire a sense of practicality from people is to obtain signed approval from trusted organizations. Given that we cannot act in the name of Student Council, we need a similarly strong alternative - a promising organization to become our secretary or our sponsor team.

“If the Student Council doesn’t work… ah, then how about the Club Presidents Association?”

Yuigahama clapped her hands suddenly as she said it. Hatano cast his eyes at her in surprise.

“Sorry, but what permissions and authority does the CPA have?”

“Huh? No, I have no idea… But, it certainly sounds like a *big* name.”

“... sure.”

Yuigahama wore a blank look and said innocently. Hatano twitched his mouth, yet couldn’t argue anything against her and eventually backed off. Amazed by this situation, I told myself ‘that’s just like Yuigahama’, and wrapped up my thoughts,

The CPA currently is dissatisfied with the status quo of the prom. Therefore, the CPA is considering holding an Oikon[24] jointly among all the school clubs… If it turns out to be a large scale event, it would probably end up being something similar to a prom."

“Heh-, that’s what you’ve been thinking. I see.”

While reaching out to the snacks, Yuigahama said as if being impressed. However, I replied dispassionately,

“Nah, I actually don’t have any idea.”

“Huh?”

Yuigahama opened her mouth wide, as if saying ‘no idea, I don’t understand you’. Setting that aside, it seems that someone did understand me.

“Ah, is this the so-called reality? This guy really tells too many lies…”

“Well, his words make sense, so it’s possible for it to be a motivation.”

Hatano and Sagami are half-galled and half-speechless. ‘This guy is a retard’, ‘His ethics are weird and twisted’ - both of them mumbled quietly to each other. Zaimokuza sitting aside also nodded and said: “agreed”.

“Essentially, it’s all about how we make sense of it to increase our credibility, especially from how others view us from the outside. As for the CPA guys, I’ll find a way to talk to them, so that’s not a problem.”

The CPA is an organization aimed at facilitating assistance between the school clubs and regulating them… I’m actually not that sure, but just by looking at its name that’s the impression I was given. It’d be great if we can have the CPA lead the prom and thus add more reality into our narratives.

I filled the whiteboard with more lies. I shall work at my best in order to wrap things up zoi! So I encouraged myself.[25]

“Alright, it all looks good to go. Who is the leader of the CPA?”

I turned my head to them as I asked. Yuigahama immediately gave me the answer.

“It’s Hayato-kun.”

“..... I see…… I will try to talk to him tomorrow.”

That fell half within my expectations, but half beyond… Speaking of which, I felt like I’ve just heard something relevant. Nevertheless, the

fact that I have to negotiate with Hayama made me turn chicken. Ah, Hayama… Why is there not a coup d'etat that replaces him with Totsuka…

"Sorry… The concept of the proposal looks clear to me, but the actual content of it is still hand-wavy. How can we bring it up to other people like this?"

The atmosphere is still heavy, yet Hatano chased and stroked me anyway. Life is tough. Nevertheless, I will do what needs to be done now.

"As for the content, well, I will come up with something that looks good. For now, could you please set up the official account on the SNS? Get something dope."

"Okay, you can count on me. I will copy paste some low-quality content from Twitter and Instagram, soooo haaard."

Zaimokuza responded immediately while saying that prolonged 'soooo hard' vehemently. Looking at Zaimokuza, Hatano seemed quite gloomy.

"Wow, this guy quickly picked the easy job."

"Well, it's fine… Give me some time to do the research."

After that, Sagami started playing around with his tablet and began his conversation with Hatano,

"... we need to create some HTML?", "How about using a builder to create a template first?", "Let's find an open-source program first", "Then what about the domain and the server?", "No idea. Let me Google it first."

Crap. These guys were more capable than I thought… especially since the first reaction is to Google it whenever there's anything that they didn't understand. Very excellent, their raised awareness makes them worthy of being otakus. Hatano's intentions are not bad, and Sagami, unlike his sister, is a pretty serious person. The other guy is a bad example though, as I sighed deeply. Well, I'm not suggesting Zaimokuza is useless at all. He worked so hard for my sake, so I really should

express my gratitude to him. I looked at Zaimokuza quietly and thought that.

“Ah, by the way, Zaimokuza, do you have a DSLR camera?”

“Yep, I bought it because I’d look cool with it.”

I can feel him… Thinking it’d be cool to have photography as one’s hobby, you yearned for it so much that you eventually bought it. However, after that, you ended up not using it at all but instead used your smartphone camera to take photos.

“Could you bring it over tomorrow? To create material for our website, It’d be great if we had a professional camera.”

“Alright. Along with the camera, I bought introductions to photography tutorials. I can bring them too, and we can read those still brand new books.”

I can feel that again… these how-to’s. You buy them but never actually read or consume them.

Well, if we are going to use them for photography, we can skim through it as long as they can serve as good references. I thought as I tapped Zaimokuza’s shoulder.

The three of them were all assigned their jobs. I was thinking about myself when Yuigahama suddenly tapped my shoulder,

“What about me?”

“You are… the art director!”

“Sounds so cool!”

Looking at her happy face, I also broke out in a smile.

“Yep, with your perfect sense of art, please supervise our website and give it a shining, exciting and mindless design.”

“Your way of speaking!”

Yuigahama shouted vehemently and her anger lasted a while before it was dissolved. She then tilted her head and asked,

“What about you, Hikki-?”

“I will lay down the basis for the proposal and the design. For now, I need to do some research and write proposals for our discussions later.”

As I was saying that, I promptly packed up my belongings. The Game Club room is an acceptable place to work, but since there’s no available computer for me, it’d be hard for me to do any research.

As soon as I stood up, Yuigahama also packed her stuff and prepared to head out. Why is she preparing to go back? I cast my questioning eyes at her. Yuigahama carried her backpack on her back, smiled proudly and said,

“When it comes to connecting the dots between the proposal and the design, you need help from the art director, right?”

“... you are right.”

I relaxed my face and nodded. Then I looked around the club room. Zaimokuza was fired up collecting information from the SNS. Sagami and Hatano loudly argued about their approach to creating the website. Okay, it looks like I can rely on them.

“... so I’m counting on you all next.”

“Good work! See you tomorrow!”

Somehow, we felt sorry for leaving the room early, so we quietly said farewell to them. Both Yuigahama and I then left the club room.

After we entered the corridor, Yuigahama, who walked next to me, asked me,

“Where shall we work?”

“Wherever there’s equipment fit for our work… Let’s say, an Internet cafe?”

“Can we watch DVDs there?”

“Yep. We can borrow the Blu-ray player and watch the recordings. By the way, there’s also an unlimited supply of ice cream.”

“I see. Then, let’s go there!”

Yuigahama then immediately picked up her pace. To avoid being left behind, I hastened my pace.

5-4

We left the school and first stopped by the video rental shop. While I was lingering in between the anime shelves, Yuigahama quickly rented the recordings she wanted. We then headed over to the Internet cafe. I would say the entire process was quite smooth so far.

Yet soon after that, I stumbled somewhere unexpected.

"How are we going to pick the seats?"

"Eh, well... let me see..."

At the reception desk of the cafe, we repeated the dialogue above for about three times. The clerk there only smiled at us, but after the second repetition, his smile froze instantly.

"I need to work on a computer, so I guess a reclining chair is preferred..."

I pointed at the Room Guide and gently expressed my concerns. Yuigahama agreed with me.

"Right, but if we want to write the proposal and create the design there, wouldn't it be better if we can watch the movie at the same time?"

Yuigahama pointed at a photo of a double-chair room, which had both a computer and a TV set. It indeed seemed more convenient to be able to watch the movie while simultaneously doing work.

"However, it'll be tough if the computer doesn't have Microsoft Office installed."

Word processing software is indispensable for writing articles. I’m not saying a simple text editor doesn't do the job, but when it comes to writing proposals, software such as Word or PowerPoint certainly makes things easier. As I explained it to Yuigahama, she seemed a little bit discouraged.

"I see..."

She breathed out in relief. The nice clerk, who hadn't complained a single word at our conversation, but merely watched over us, finally interrupted us with a smile.

"We do have a double-chair room with a computer that has Microsoft Office preinstalled."

What a god-like interruption! Yuigahama quickly put on a happy face and thanked the clerk.

"Oh, that's great! Thank you so much! ... He said we can have it all!"

What now then? She asked me. Well, checkmate. I lost the game.

"So, please get us the double-chair room..."

I pointed at the double-chair room photo with my trembling finger.

The clerk gave us a warm smile that even surpassed the temperature of the air-conditioned room. He quickly processed our request and then walked us to the room. His eyes were so gentle, it even made me feel embarrassed and I started scratching myself under my sweat-in coat.

It's not like I hate the double-chair room. It just makes me feel embarrassed, or should I say the confined space makes me feel very uneasy to act or do anything. It's just very troubling for me.

The booth turned out to be only 2 Jo (40 sq ft or 3.6m^2). I was holding a beverage glass I'd taken from the drink bar, so it took me some effort to get myself seated.

"Just in case, I actually did some research about the prom beforehand."

Yuigahama got seated before I did and promptly started preparing to play the DVDs she borrowed. She pressed the play button on the remote control. I tried to move to one side of the chair, booted up the computer, and started working. While writing down the outline of my proposal, I peeked at the screen and noted down anything that seized my attention or seemed to be usable for the prom.

When the movie was about to enter the prom scene, Yuigahama tapped my shoulder to let me know.

"I don't think we have this kind of building at our school. It seems like a dance hall, I think? Ah, but the one we just saw took place outdoors."

"We haven’t decided on a place yet. Since the prom will be jointly held by multiple schools, it might seem more realistic in the proposal to decide on a place that doesn't belong to any of the participating schools."

I wrote down my thoughts on the memo as I spoke. Yuigahama seemed quite impressed and nodded a couple of times.

"I see... So for example, like Destinyland?"[26]

"That's not financially feasible."

"I know... Just wanted to say it."

Yuigahama pouted her lips unhappily and turned away from me. She took a sip from the cocoa that she was holding. Her reaction was so heartwarming to me, that I stopped typing on the keyboard and couldn't help but break into my smile.

"Well, at least it does look very Chiba-like."

"Although, the rest of the world probably thinks it's just very Tokyo-like."

"It is from Chiba!"[27]

"How stubborn!"

Yuigahama covered her smile and exclaimed to my words.

As is expected from the place, our quieter-than-usual conversation came out sounding like pillow talk, regardless of our topics of discussion. A dark room separated from the outside world. Perhaps, for this reason, we were able to see each other's appearances slightly more clearly than usual.

Yuigahama tightly hugged a rolled-up blanket, instead of a cushion, along with her knees in front of her.

"Hmmm then, what about the Crescent Moon King Palace Hotel?"[28]

"That's so Chiba-like! But not quite prom-like."

"That's not true. I used to have a family trip there."

As soon as she finished speaking, she grabbed her smartphone and started looking for the photos. After she scrolled down the screen a couple of times with her finger, she seemed to find it. She then straightened her waist and angled the phone towards me.

"See!"

Yuigahama's selfie was shown to me. In the photo, Yuigahama was wearing a T-shirt and at the top was her face along with a peace gesture (V sign) in front of it. Behind her was a swimming pool at night, filled with lasers and neon lights in the background. Unfortunately, not fully captured in the photo, there was also Yuigahama's mom in a swimming suit, restfully relaxing on a beach chair. Gahamom, so young... Genes are formidable.[29]

Ah, well, this is not the important thing. The pool is. My point being, the swimming pool really seized my attention for its excessively gorgeous and luxurious decorations, even more so than a live concert hall. I looked at the pool in the background, again.

"What's up with that pool? So lewd... Is it the so-called night pool? Totally party mood..."

"Not... not lewd at all!"

Yuigahama's face quickly turned red. She started hitting my feet with her rolled-up blanket. She then rapidly flipped over her smartphone screen and showed me the official website of the hotel - hey look, am I right?

Judging from the front page of the official website, the hotel did look quite wholesome, giving me an impression of beauty and gorgeousness.

"Well, at least it seems more financially feasible than the previous one... By the way, is it open outside of summer?"

"Yep, seems like it is."

Yuigahama nodded and showed me the smartphone screen. I peeked at the screen briefly and saw '365 days all year round' and stuff... The King Palace Castle is terrific! Makes me really want to go now...

"But just one thing, it's kind of far away from here... I'd like to take the photographs somewhere closer."

As I thought that, I opened my unfinished proposal folder. Speaking of the website design, I really wanted an impactful and impressive image as its background, but unfortunately, it seemed that it might take a while to decide on the location and other stuff at this point. So let's set it aside for now.

Yuigahama was also thinking about it. Her voice, however, was mixed with yawns,

"Hmmm, photos... Uhhah, what about by the ocean side?"

"Ocean? Where?"

"The one that's close to our school?"

"That's just the Tokyo Bay, though..."

It's not even Chiba Bay sadly... Resort land or a factory night scene might even be good, but just a normal beach in winter doesn't look photogenic at all.

However, Yuigahama didn't seem to agree with me. She used her shoulder to push over my shoulder as if she were a little angry at me. She then began explaining slowly.

"It's a good choice in my opinion. Or perhaps I should say it's *that* ocean that makes it a great choice. We can even see it from our school, right?"

"Ah, yeah."

"And then, that scene when it's evening, like usual, the sun sets over the sea... Every time I see it, I always marvel at its beauty and cherish the fun I had for the day."

She closed her eyes and whispered as if she was dreaming it.

She didn't mention when or where, but despite that, I was quite certain that she was referring to *that* sunset *there*.

Right before the sun disappears on the horizon of the ocean, just for a brief moment, *that* room was filled with sunshine.

Having seen it countless times, it’s definitely not anything special - it’s only a ubiquitous sunset scenery.

I took it for granted, so much so, that I forgot what conversations I had, what books I read, but was able to vaguely delineate and casually consume *that* sunset.

"That is..."

The sentence was cut off and then resumed. The weight on my shoulders had become more concrete and realistic.

"I was thinking… if only days like these can go on forever..."

She said, with such a gentle voice that almost disappeared immediately. I waited until her words completely dissolved in the air and then nodded my head,

"...yeah, right..."

Perhaps because it was too long of a pause to call it a conversation, she did not respond to me. Instead, only 'suu, suu' peaceful breathing could be heard. My shoulder could feel the soft weight on it.

The movie had already reached its climax.

Perhaps it wouldn't be long before the closing credits started rolling. Even if I wanted to skip back, I wouldn't know where to skip to, since I

only watched half of the movie and gave up.

Should I let the movie play and keep watching it until it ends?

Or, should I skip back to the very beginning and start it over?

Or should I even keep doing what I have been doing - keep pretending that I'm not watching?

I had no time to worry about it, as the closing credits already started rolling.

Interlude 4

I'm pretending that I'm sleeping.

I hope the movie never ends, just as it is playing right now.

It'd be better if the end of the movie never comes.

I can clearly feel the body temperature on my face. It is a lot higher than I thought. I try to be mindful, not moving my body by even a single inch. The slightly hardened and straightened shoulder is bigger than I thought.

He moves only his other hand, with his fingers hitting the keyboard quietly. Sometimes after a while, I can hear that he briefly halts his work and makes a barely audible sigh.

He quietly brings up the blanket that only covered my knees, but then he suddenly stops as I feel a little itchy and make a sound. I try to cover that sound with my sleeping breath. He then pulls up another blanket of his own and covers my body all the way up to my shoulder.

The movie is about to end.

The lengthy credits keep rolling and rolling to the end. That way, I have to keep pretending that I'm sleeping. Yet again, I'm making another lie.

I came all the way until this moment, pretending that I didn't see anything, pretending that I didn't know anything, pretending that I didn't understand anything.

Nevertheless, I actually know and have noticed everything - that by doing things like this, the conclusion has already been drawn and the ending already settled.

However, this is the only thing I can do. This is the only way that I can think of.

So that we can be together, owning the time that we spend together, cherishing the place that all three of us can stay. I believe I have tried to do everything that I can to make this happen.

I know it - that I'm running, that I'm making excuses, that I'm lying. I know all that.

But still, please let our time together go on, even if it's really just a little longer.

I will make sure it ends properly.

I won't make any other wishes, even if they're needed.

I will stop the tears that are about to pour out even if I don't know exactly when they'll come out.

So, please. Please give me a place to cry - a place where nobody can see.

So, please. Please make the lies that I always tell myself somehow become real.

So, please. Please let me and her somehow end our relationship properly.

So, please.

Please do not let us end it.

Chapter 6: Without anybody knowing, Hayama Hayato is regretting.

It’s always a serious matter of life and death when it comes to battling with a deadline.

Therefore, not only are people willing to do anything to survive in the end, but they are also willing to sacrifice their sleeping time, to pull all-nighters for two or three days in order to somehow finish their tasks in hand, even if that means losing almost all their hair or almost having a complete mental or physical breakdown.

As a result, people end up with all kinds of suffering. Well, to be more specific, head, shoulders, back, stomach, heart, body, and… everything that a human being possesses. Hmm, since the cells in my body are working anyway, does that mean that I no longer have to work?

I managed to finish the skeleton of the proposal and the design sketch by the end of the morning. Holding all the tiredness in my body, I walked to school before the start of the first class. I almost slept through all the classes before noon.

Even when school started, I lazily laid on the table without thinking or paying attention to anything.

Occupied by tiredness, I just wanted to yield to sleepiness and bury my head in my arms, so that later after school I could wake up and face things with a more serious face again.

I spent the homeroom time drowsily resting my chin in my hand, like rowing a boat. Just like this, I had my heart and body falling into deep hibernation until the bell for the end of last class sounded.

I put my bag, coat, and scarf on the table, and then stretched my hardened shoulder and back as much as I wanted. I steadily stood up.

After rubbing my sleep-deprived eyes, I turned around to check out the back of the classroom as usual. Just as I was doing so, Yuigahama, who was talking to Miura-san, noticed me and temporarily halted her conversation. She walked towards me with her quick steps.

“Leaving already?”

“Ah, yeah”

As I responded with a husky voice, Yuigahama reacted with a small whining “Whoa.”

“Hikki-, your face is awful.”

“Seriously…?”

Yuigahama took out her hand mirror from her uniform pocket and raised it in front of my face. ‘Ugh, so shiny. I feel like I’m about to disappear’ I said to myself. I looked like a zombie - my rotten-fish eyes were rotting even faster due to lack of sleep. I could even see the marks left by my hands where I rested my chin.

“Let me wash my face quickly”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll wait in the corridor”

Leaving the classroom, with my body shaking like Zombieland-Chiba[30], I headed over to the washroom.

After splashing some cold water onto my face, I felt a lot more refreshed. In addition to that, “pan-pan” - I slapped my face and said “Ganbare, me!” I sounded like a second-year salary woman to cheer myself up.

As I headed back to the classroom corridor, as promised, Yuigahama was waiting for me in front of the classroom door.

“Sorry for making you wait.”

Yuigahama shook her head to simply suggest that she didn’t wait too long. She handed over my bag, coat, and all my other stuff together that she was holding over her shoulder, saying, “Here you go.”

“Thank you!”

While I took my stuff and expressed my gratitude, Yuigahama had her usual smile showing on her face again, shaking her head as if to refuse my thanks.

On our way to the game club, we exchanged a few words. Due to sleepiness, I still felt like I wasn’t quite myself. So I tried to stifle my yawns.

Noticing this after looking at me, Yuigahama started to feel a little despondent.

“Ah, by the way, sorry for what happened yesterday that led to your lack of sleep today.”

“It’s okay… Conversely, it really helped that you came up with some great ideas.”

Yuigahama apologized to me for accidentally falling asleep at the Internet Cafe. Perhaps she was trying to compensate for that - on our way sending her back home, she offered me a couple more perspectives, suggestions and ideas with respect to the prom design plan. Thanks to those suggestions, with pulling just a single all-nighter, I was able to put forward a rough sketch of the proposal and the design plan. Well, by

cost-benefit analysis, it all added up to zero. It worked out and looked good on the balance sheet.

Yuigahama didn't need to be worried about me. To be honest, I was the one to be blamed for carelessly yawning in front of her, which made her worry about me. So from now on, I'll tighten my eyebrows and keep my face straight!

"... Well, it's no problem since I no longer feel sleepy."

Yuigahama looked at me vacantly and then suddenly went "Phff!" and smiled,

"What's that funny face about?"

"My face…?"

Well, that was quite bitter and not nice to me but... fine. It's good that I got my mood switched up before entering the game club room.

What a messy room as usual! As I tried to navigate the mess, I could hear voices coming out from inside the room.

"'First, migrate the server using PHP and prepare a database backup."

"What is this? No way, I don't understand"

"'Then use JavaScript to further enhance the site and CSS to set up the design…"

"Ugh, how far is this going to push back the deadline?"

Now I could see both Hatano and Sagami clearly - it sounded like they were talking about the website and both of their faces were full of despair. It looked like they worked quite hard to do their research, and as a result, they were both struck hard by reality.

And there was this guy on the other side wearing a truthfully evil smile on his face while scrolling through the SNS[31]. Of course, I was talking about Zaimokuza.

I wanted to say hello while bearing my genuine thanks to their hard work, but as I made up my mind, I ended up just mumbling “Usu/hello there” to them. Noticing me, three of them replied to me one by one cheerfully, “Hey there, good work!”, “Otsukare!” and “Hey!”. Well, that’s exactly the kind of greetings between guys!

Following that, Yuigahama also cheerfully raised her hand and greeted them.

“Yahallo!!”

That greeting completely froze the air in the clubroom.

“What… what’s that Yahallo...?”

“Ehhh, that girl is dangerously yabai, yabai, yabeeee.”

….well, that’s the normal reaction human beings should have! I do not blame them. Yet with that reaction, we are never going to get things done peacefully.

“Please don’t make a fuss over it for now. I have something important to tell you guys.”

I pulled out a chair to sit down and cleared my throat. Hatano and others also got ready to hear what I had to say and straightened their backs. Confirming that everyone was listening, I solemnly opened my mouth.

“Starting as of today, we, the Prom Executive Committee, will all greet each other with ‘Yahallo’! No objections!”

“Is this guy seriously a moron...?”

“Something is wrong with his brain.”[32]

Looks like Hatano was honestly shocked. Meanwhile, Sagami showed his genuine expression of sympathy towards something so pathetic.

“Hold… hold on, wait a second, Hikki…! This is seriously very embarrassing, so please stop.”

Yuigahama kept her shy blushing face down and tugged my sleeve as if begging me to stop.

Seeing this cute animal-like behavior, Sagami pushed up his glasses while Hatano took his off. Both of them scrubbed their eyes as if they just beheld a very touching moment…

“Ah well. Let’s go with Yahallo. It’s good!”

“Yeah. Yahallo is good...”

“Correct. Here we go everyone, three, two, one…”

Zaimokuza led the crowd and, following his countdown, everyone sang Yahallo together,

“Yahallo--”

“Stop. Now.”

With tears in her eyes, Yuigahama stared at us and spoke with an extremely cold and scary voice. Silence befell the clubroom. Seeing everyone keep so quiet, I felt compelled to steer the topic towards something else. Otherwise, Gahama-san will stay angry for sure!

“Let’s jump into our main subject today.”

I pulled out the freshly-produced copies of the proposal and design sketches, passing them out to everyone. I started to explain them, with my fingers guiding my explanation.

“I want the front page to be loaded with a huge background picture, with information about the event on top of it. This is to attract attention and thus facilitate people’s discussions about it on the SNS. The front page doesn’t have to be too exquisite or refined. Try to keep it simple and smartly decorated. I have found a sample page for you guys for reference and you just have to try your best to copy exactly the design layout of it. As for the background picture, just assume that you have it already, for now. Once it’s ready, we’ll just need to swap it in.”

Hatano looked at the stack of (web development) resources they compiled and then turned to my design sketch. He couldn't help but express his astonishment.

"What's up with all the effort that we've put in so far… This sounds like all we have to spawn is an easy blog thing."

"Hey, things getting easier for us is definitely a great thing that we should feel happy about. Don't say anything extra or complain. Or else, he's gonna add more work on us..."

Sagami dragged and held Hatano's arm firmly, as Hatano was about to keep grumbling. Apparently, Sagami didn't want Hatano to say anything else. Oh Sagami, the little brother, you know the rules of society too well. You have the potential and the talent to become a great Shachiku (Wage Slave in Japan). Speaking of which, I'm impressed, or should I say terrified, by how you guys were able to pull off a research marathon on building the website.

Zaimokuza, who apparently enjoyed the fact that he didn't have to help with all the design work, looked at my design sketch with satisfaction, nodded his head a couple of times, and folded up his arms,

"So, how's the proposal going?"

"This is what I have for now. I'm currently proposing a collaboration with Kaihin-Sougo HS[33]. It might be too specific, so it might be hard for you to understand."

Zaimokuza took the proposals that I passed over and read them all at once. He then turned his head and called Hatano. Hatano only looked at the front page of the proposal and said,

"Seriously, what is this, I do not understand..."

"This crappy proposal looks like some ad's pamphlet for a newly built apartment or a cover for a newly released business book… Why did you include diagrams on the 'Johari Window' and 'Maslow's hierarchy of needs' in the proposal?"[[34]

Hatano quickly picked up the proposal sheets that fell off the table, gave them to Sagami, who flipped through the pages one by one. A few pages into the proposal, Sagami, the little brother, started to hold and squeeze his head in his hands.

As I warned you guys beforehand… An unpleasant memory flowed back into my mind again, as I took another look at the front page of the proposal. Sternly written there, typeset using very stylish fonts was "Blockchain Type Diversity Inclusion - Proposal for the Prom Event ~ Sunset Beach with Waterfront aside… A Serendipity Experience inside an Ultimate Translucent Space~". Even as the creator of that title, I could no longer grasp any of its meaning.

Even a proud person like myself couldn't withstand the embarrassment caused by seeing the title. "Ahem Ahem". I soon tried to cough to cover it up and avoid talking about it further.

"... Well. Those are the bluff parts. To be honest, whatever it takes as long as the Kaihin-Sougo side can be hooked into our plan."

"Wow, even this kind of trap (which also means bait in JP) can hook them in. Are they mullets[35]?"

You are very wrong, Hatano. Tamanawa-san isn't that omnivorous at all. Don't mix him up with heretic animals like mullets or blowfishes. Well, they are very delicious dishes, I have to say. He possesses such strong self-esteem that he could be called the Majesty Overlord[36]. Yet finally, the moment has come - for the first time - the Overlord is going to be fished by us!

Hatano already gave up on reading the proposal a while ago. Sagami, in contrast, still had the patience to keep on reading it. Eventually, Sagami finished reading it and nodded his head, mumbling "Yep, okay, okay".

"Wow. The content itself looks very promising."

"I know, right?" Yuigahama quickly followed up happily.

Almost at the same time, Sagami tilted his mouth. "I feel like my sister is going to like this."

Yuigahama seemed a little surprised with a “Heh…” sound, but she quickly held her reaction back with another “Ugu.”

“Alright. Just by reading it, this disgusting proposal looks like it’s gonna make people vomit, right out from their stomachs.”

“The only good part is that we have to make sure this proposal does not get chosen and realized.”

Respectively, Zaimokuza moaned his last sentence out with a voice full of hatred; Hatano said his words as if disgusted by the smell of rotten fish.

Oh well. I can sense that perhaps Yuigahama just made a pitiful expression on her face. In any case, with that little reaction, I can feel assured that she doesn't feel like there’s anything inherently wrong with the proposal.

In addition to the great ideas of “collaborating with local elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools”, the proposal was further nourished by Yuigahama’s flashy ideas - this was so perfect, that even I, myself, was trembling with fear.

In the end, we couldn’t come up with anything that’s flashy and arbitrary enough that diverged too far away from Yukinoshita’s old proposal. We just decided to play around and “temper” the staging and the location of the prom a little bit.

Imagine this scenario: Sunset by the sea, surrounded by a campfire, a seaside live-house has been set up just like those Shounan Beach Events[37]. We will plan to hold our prom there. Actually no, we just have to make use of this “set up”. Taking into account the possibility of rain, we can then propose a Plan B - also discuss the possibility of negotiations with Mikatsuki Ryuguu Castle Hotel just so we could also hold our prom there as a backup option.[38]

Wow, scary Hachiman. I’m scared by my ability to BS so well. If I keep cultivating my BS skills, I’m afraid that soon HRs from those advertisement conglomerate companies will start reaching out to me. As my imagination drifted further away, Yuigahama, perhaps dissatisfied by

the fact that she sided with Sagami, the sister, raised her head up from reading the proposal and frowned at me.

“Even though Kaihin-Sougou might be okay with our proposal, what about Hayato?”

“Ahh, as for him… It might still be too early for us to tell him face to face”

“Hmmm?”

As I indirectly brought up some bitter part of my experiences with Hayato from the past, Yuigahama tilted her head aside, looking totally puzzled. Honestly, it’s not like the experience was puzzling or strange in particular.

In my opinion, cheap tricks won’t work on Hayato. I’m afraid that even if I explained the content of our proposals cautiously enough, in front of someone as smart as Hayato the fact that our proposal was just a stalking horse would soon get exposed. For this reason, to avoid causing extra effort or trouble to explain everything, and to avoid complicating things, perhaps it’s better just to tell him straightforwardly that our proposal is just a dummy plan, before explaining its actual content. That will make things easier to proceed.

“Alright! That’s it. I’m counting on you all.”

By saying that I finally concluded our meeting. Although the responses were cold and sporadic, they all got their hands busy right away.

Hatano and Sagami continued their fight on how they should go about designing the websites, leaving Yuigahama alone on the side, just nodding her head saying “Um, um”.

“Emm, that’s not cute enough.”

“... Eh, can you be more specific?” Sagami respectfully asked Yuigahama.

“Well, let’s say, make it a little more shining shiny, like this…”

While scratching her head, Yuigahama tried her best to describe her abstract opinions more concretely, so that she could somehow make Sagami and Hatano understand them.

I watched them from the side, pleasantly listening to their non-stop interactions and exchange of conversation. On the other end of my vision, Zaimokuza seemed to be rustling with something.

“Hachiman, I brought the digital camera you requested.”

Speaking of which, he carefully placed a bulky DSLR camera onto the desk. In addition, he began stacking books titled like “Intro to DSLR Tutorials”.

“Oh, thank you! I will make good use of them for the moment… Just in case, please teach me how to operate this camera.”

“Of course, leave it to me! I’m not a professional per se, but let’s just follow the instruction manual and let’s go~”

“Hey, isn’t this your camera?”

How could this guy not know how to operate his own stuff… Zaimokuza loudly proclaimed that he is proud of his ignorance. On one hand, he taught me some of the basic operations, on the other hand, he quickly scanned through the instruction manual, while he kept saying “Okay, I see, I see”.

A while later, when he got a little tired and felt ignored, Zaimokuza coughed a couple of times. And then for some reason he averted his eyes, blushed and said,

“I have thought about… the name.”

“Oh… really”

That is something that’s far beyond what’s urgent or necessary for now… Well, I’m listening, anyway. Zaimokuza took out a piece of double folded paper from his coat pocket and handed it over to me. Apparently, he wants me to open and see it…

It can't be helped. I had to briefly halt my work on reading the camera tutorial and unfold that piece of paper. What I saw was an unnecessarily well-written work of calligraphy that said,

"Soubu HS Prom Saikou Project"

What the hell is this? Having my "camera reading" focus zone totally ruined, I suddenly remembered something from yesterday…

"Oh, the name!"

We had a discussion during yesterday's meeting about the name of our committee. Apparently, when I wrote "Committee Name: Actively Looking for Recommendations ❤️" on the whiteboard, this guy actually took it seriously. Zaimokuza coughed twice again, then fluttered his coat edge with dignity.

"That's right! The aforementioned 'Saikou' means…"

"Ah ah, stop there. Alright, it's okay, we all get it."

"Umm… okay, I see."

Apparently, Zaimokuza was let down, his face quickly drooped. I bet he was trying to say something along the lines of including "Supreme" or "Reconsideration"[39] in the context. Well, whatevs. The key is to make the name easy enough to understand and stupid enough to reflect its dumbness. Considering these two points, the name is unexpectedly fit for the job. Especially this pun on words would definitely leave a SUPREMELY dumb and stupid impression on people. This was great.

"We can settle on this title. Thanks!"

"Wut??"

Probably because I said it too lightheartedly, Zaimokuza was speechlessly surprised. Seeing that, Hatano passed that piece of paper back to Sagami.

"The Committee Name, as it's settled, let's all count on it!"

“What…”

“Seriously…”

Both Hatano and Sagami’s faces turned stiff, making wry, bitter smiles at me. After seeing their reactions, Yuigahama nevertheless looked pretty satisfied, “Isn’t it great!”

“Hmmm, oh, ah, okay, I see. Is it that great…” Finally able to read the atmosphere and grasp the situation, Zaimokuza tried to cover his shyness by coughing twice again, thereby digesting his ecstasy completely before it leaked out.

In fact, I think there’s going to be an even better title in the future. Please stay tuned and let’s all look forward to the next masterpiece from Zaimokuza Yoshiteru-Sensei!

6-2

The sun was slowly setting. The last ray of sunshine flowed into the Game Club Room.

It was also about time for the other school clubs to conclude their daily activities.

The noises from those heavy bands could no longer be heard. Roars from the rugby club have also stopped for a while. Standing up from my seat and peeking into the schoolyard, I noticed that it was also about time for the soccer club to wrap up their day as well.

“Alright, this is about it. Everyone, please clean up your own things and we can call it a day.”

As I turned my face back from peeking out of the window and told them to wrap up, the club room soon filled up with sighs arisen from exhaustion, and clicking sounds coming from head rotation and relaxed shoulders. Yuigahama, not unexpectedly, also relaxed her shoulders and turned her body to face me.

“Are you going to check with Hayato?”

“Yeah.”

As soon as I finished speaking, Yuigahama took out her smartphone and brought it close to her lips.[40]

“Should I contact him now?”

“Hmm, let me think. No, nope, actually. It’s better to just catch him on the spot.”

It took me just a flash of a second to change my mind.

Means of communications such as phones or messenger apps are in fact very unreliable and incomplete tools. Using tools like these, getting ignored pretty much means the end of the road. “Oh, I didn’t notice your

message", "I was sleeping then", "It ran out of battery", "I lost my phone, unfortunately", "In fact, I do not have a LINE account", these are all kinds of excuses that poured out from my memory. There are even rare cases like "Oh, I actually don't have a phone", myself being the source.

Hayato is very unlikely to ignore messages from Yuigahama. If it does happen, though, and we have to reschedule and start over on another day, that'd be very problematic since we simply won't have enough time left. Hence, we HAVE to take our chance and get it done today.

Yuigahama was probably thinking along the same line and nodded to me,

"I see… but just to be safe, I'll still send him a message on LINE anyway. I'll let you know as soon as he replies."

"Sure. Please do me this favor."

As I said it, I quickly packed things up and left the Game Club room.

After leaving the staircase, I promptly turned my feet towards the courtyard.

The courtyard lies in between the main building and the special-purpose building. Since the courtyard was blocked by buildings from all directions, the night fades there earlier than all other places on campus. It's worth noting that the columns located in the east under the main buildings naturally fall under the shadows of the special-purpose building, thereby leaving the darkness even thicker underneath.

Suddenly, a section of shadow moved across in that darkness.

I tried to focus my eyes on that shadow, and I could finally see that there seemed to be someone standing in front of the vending machine under the building. As I walked closer towards there, gradually I could identify that the figure apparently belonged to a girl.

She probably just bought something to drink from the vending machine. I could hear something had just dropped out from inside of it. She squatted down, picked up the drink from the vending machine and stood up. That long, glamorously charming dark hair of hers waved in the

wind. The vending machine cast cold, green-white colored light onto her white, slender face. She smiled gently, a scene that was so unrealistic and so surreal.

That was Yukinoshita Yukino. I couldn't possibly have mistaken her.

Yukino firmly held the coffee can and gently put on her feather coat without her arms going through the sleeves. She then slowly walked towards the courtyard, sitting down on the bench located in the middle of the courtyard and aimlessly stared into the sky.

As if trying to penetrate the bench, the withered tree groves were lit up by the streetlights, where orange light passed down through the dry twigs that were already devoid of leaves.

All of this looked like it came from a piece of art. I sensed a feeling that compelled and drove me to just stare at this painting forever.

Unfortunately, without passing through the courtyard I could reach neither the soccer court nor the bike parking lot. So, feeling sorry in my mind that I was about to ruin this already-perfect scenery, I decided to step into the scene.

Soon, she noticed the footsteps and looked at me.

"Oh, isn't this Hikigaya-kun?"

"Ah… yeah…"

Seeing that Yukinoshita's facial expression regained composure and that her smile returned, I used my jaw to nod in response to her greetings.

Yukinoshita was holding the coffee can to warm her hands up. But after seeing me, she sighed and hid the coffee can behind her. That's no use. No matter how you hide it, with that featured packaging, color and design there was no way I could possibly miss it.

"It's rare for you to drink that."

"It's perfect for sugar and energy replenishment."

She showed a very superficial smile to me as she spoke, with her face dyed in dim red. She closed up her coat as if she was hugging herself and hid the coffee can inside. Finally, she's recognized the charm of MAX Coffee! That's a good thing.

I quickly peeked at the soccer court - it looked like they were still busy tidying things up. Maybe I should wait a little longer before I go over and catch Hayama.

Using only eye contact, I asked Yukinoshita if I could sit next to her. She nodded, and immediately moved her body away from the center of the bench, leaving some empty room that was just wide enough for another person to sit down. So I did.

"Taking a break?", I asked.

"Yeah, in order to get some fresh air outdoors."

While answering my question, Yukinoshita quickly cast her eyes back to the main building. In that direction lay the Student Council room, in which the lights were still on. Unlike the Service Club room, almost always empty, deserted, and desolate, the Student Council room, since there's a heater that Isshiki decided to bring over, people must have been living a pleasantly warm life there.

"I know, right. The heater is too effective so that people easily get drowsy from it."

I had to agree with her since I remembered that thanks to the stacks of stuff in the Game Club room blocking the air ventilation, that place also inevitably kept a lot of heat. Hearing my words, Yukinoshita was amused and laughed merrily with her mouth covered.

"Well, with that reasoning, it looks like you always stay in a heated room, am I right? I'm a little worried about the electricity bill."[41]

"Don't worry. It all gets balanced out by the coldness coming from other people's indifferent, nonchalant gazes on me."

"You really live an eco-friendly life."

Yukinoshita shrugged her shoulders. I also mocked myself with a tilted smile on one side of my lips,

“Well, having this repeated hot-and-cold pattern is great, certainly even better if served in a sauna room. It gets my life in order.”

“I wonder if you know the correct usage of ‘get something in order’.”

“No, maybe I don’t. However, everyone says ‘Saunas get one’s life in order’. In fact, after repeating the steam room and in the middle of the glycine bath, there’s a process called the ‘air bath’ right? As far as I know, people always say “Air baths get one’s life in order”.”

“You seem to have no intention to get your usage of grammar in order… I have no idea what you are talking about. Not a single idea.”[42]

Facing someone like me, someone arguing so intensely and foolishly to defend oneself, Yukinoshita shrugged her shoulders again.

She didn’t understand, or even tried to understand, a single word I said. I bet you’re going to get wrecked for wasting your spa money! I’m serious. Sometimes my father would take me to spas by chance and I’d just follow him. Thanks for the treat, Dad! Some of the spas even offer free manga to read. So instead of going to those manga coffee shops like a fool, going to these manga spas is definitely a far better way to enjoy the weekends. Even though saunas sound like some old dude’s hobby, nowadays anime shows that feature this old dude’s hobbies are getting more and more popular! I can sense the slipperiness from an anime or manga where girls enjoy the sauna. While imagining that, I felt my skin feeling tingly already. Hey, I was referring to saunas though, not the girls!

While continuing my daydreaming, I snuck a peek at Yukinoshita’s face.

Her eyes still held full confidence that she would win the match between us; her mouth was still wearing a calm and composed smile, just like a few days ago when I looked into her eyes as I left the Student Council room. Of course, this is something that I’ve already gotten used to.

While I quietly commemorated the sense of distance between us, I smirked bitterly and finally opened my mouth,

“How’s it going? I mean, the proposal.”

Yukinoshita was a little shocked by what I asked and looked straight at me. But she soon turned her expression into a teasing smile.

“...how rare it is that you start to care about others.”

“It’s not like that. Of course, I have to study my enemy.”

Hearing me explaining myself calmly, Yukinoshita was left dumbfounded and speechless for a minuscule moment. But then, she smirked and shrugged her shoulders,

“I see. It’s been going quite well. We managed to finish all the pending tasks, and now we are coordinating things smoothly among all parties. I guess the only thing left is the assignment and distribution of work on the day of the event.”

As she went through each item one by one, her eyes looked upward as if she was ticking each of them. Judging from her voice and emotion, she didn’t look like she was being occupied by the work at all.

“That makes me so jealous… Well, don’t force yourself too much. Just use Isshiki as much as you can, even if that means crushing her completely. After all, she has the potential to become a great wage slave[43].”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. That’s what I’m going to do, anyway.”

I said that in a half-joking, half-serious way, whereas Yukinoshita narrowed her eyes with a clever smile floating on her face. That’s so scary - unlike me, she looked like she was totally serious about it.

“What about you?”

She lost the stiffness and seriousness on her face and asked me gently. I hid behind my fluffy scarf and replied to her,

“Well, it’s going as planned. We managed to finish just the right amount of work and proceed without working overtime. I just have one more thing to do after this - something outdoors that I don’t know how long

it'll take. Once that's done I'm heading straight home and will get the rest of my work done there."

"Sounds like only the 'time management' part is going well for you."

Yukinoshita tapped her fingers on her temple as if she was trying to suppress a headache. She sighed, perhaps feeling a little uncomfortable and uneasy by what I said. After that, she looked down and stared at her feet.

"You don't even have to work that hard. You know..."

She said that gently and softly, just like the white breath coming out from her mouth that soon disappeared in the air. I then returned to her a gentle, small nod and then took my time searching for words to say,

"...I have come this far by forcing myself to work hard. You know that this is typical for me."

"I see."

She nodded forcibly, biting her lips hard. She didn't say anything after that. Instead, she put her hand inside her coat and then slowly took something out.

"Please…"

That's the MAX coffee can that she just bought earlier. Probably because it was in her pocket all this time, touching it still gave me a feeling of well-preserved warmth.

"Ah, thanks a lot… wait, but why?"

"You still have work to do after this, right? I'm just out here to take a break. I'll go drink something once I'm back to the club room."

While saying that, she stood up from the bench. I waved my hands at her to try to stop her. I knew that it simply wouldn't work, so I quickly stood up as well.

"Wait a second… Eh, what should I get for you, then?"

I took out the coin change from my pocket, which made a tinkling sound. Yukinoshita heard the sound and shook her head.

“It’s okay. Keep the money yourself and buy some treats for your club members.”

“No, it makes no sense if only I get the treat. If you are treating me drinks to provide me with moral support then I have to properly return the favor. That’s good manners. Can I get the same thing for you? I was planning on getting the MAX can, anyway.”

After hearing my long excuse, Yukinoshita seemed to be slightly disturbed, staring at me with dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, perhaps sensing my strong will to defend my actions, she sighed again, signaling her will to surrender. She then gave me an honest smile,

“Nothing but sophism...”

Knowing that she couldn’t refuse my favor, anyway, she kept her smile and returned to the bench. She looked up at me, her head slightly tilted,

“... then, the same thing for me please.”

I acknowledged quietly to her broad smile. I quickly ran to the vending machine and returned with another can of MAX coffee. Still being slightly out of breath, I handed over the MAX can that was still hot,

“Careful, it’s hot!”

Yukinoshita then stretched her cardigan sleeves a little over her hands. With extra care, she took the hot coffee can that I passed over, using her sleeves to insulate the heat.

“Thank you....”

I shook my head in reply to her expression of gratitude. I returned to the bench and removed the cap from the MAX Coffee can that I was holding. The steam that rose from the can refracted the orange light passing through and gradually dissolved in the wind. I took a sip of my coffee. The sweetness quickly spread over my mouth and the coffee soon warmed up my body.

While I was drinking the coffee one sip after another, Yukinoshita held the can firmly to warm up both of her hands.

We both kept the silence undisturbed and let the time pass by. Occasionally I was about to say something, or she was going to, but in the end, only breaths remained.

However, thanks to the quiet breaths and the darkness of the environment, we were able to notice even the slightest gestures, expressions, or actions between us. I was already missing this sense of distance, then.

In the end, we were never able to have any proper conversations, but only indulged ourselves in this speechless period of time together. Suddenly, an abrupt sound broke the silence. It came from my pocket. My leg felt a vibration. I pulled out my smartphone and found an incoming call.

“Excuse me.”

After my brief apology, Yukinoshita shook her head gently, implying that she didn’t mind it at all. I nodded to her and returned to my smartphone - on the screen it said that it was a call from Yui. Just as I was about to pick up the call, the vibration halted immediately. Just when I was wondering “What was that about?”, I heard footsteps made by loafer heels hitting the ground. Yukinoshita turned her face to the source of the sound, as did I.

“Good evening, Yuigahama-san”

“Good evening…. Yahallo, Yukinon!”

Like a greeting during a quiet night, Yuigahama lowered her voice and waved her hand gently right above her chest to us. Then, she slowly approached us and the bench. The street light lit up Yuigahama wearing a scarf on top of her coat and carrying her backpack on her back. Apparently, she was prepared to leave.

“... What’s up? Heard anything from Hayama?”

“Right. He wanted me to tell you that we can get dinner together and take our time to talk.”

When she was answering my question, she waved her smartphone gently at me. Given that Hayama had already reached out to me, I don’t think I have any other reasons to stay here. As for his suggestion to get dinner together, I guessed it was better just to meet him near the train station.

I finished up the remaining coffee and stood up.

“Work?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded to Yukinoshita, as she looked up and asked me. She also checked the time, put the MAX Coffee can back into her pocket, and stood up.

“I’m also going back to work.”

“Wait!”

Just when they were about to pass each other without meeting, Yuigahama took Yukinoshita’s hand. Perhaps caught by surprise, Yukinoshita froze and looked at Yuigahama in doubt. Being speechlessly stared at, Yuigahama got a little bit embarrassed, and quietly touched her hair bun with one hand.

“I feel like, for some reason, we haven’t seen each other for a long time. It’s strange… I wonder, for how many days haven’t we met each other...?”

“Right…. I was so occupied with my work that I couldn’t find any spare time.”

In response to Yuigahama’s shy smile, Yukinoshita returned a gentle smile to her. After seeing that smile, Yuigahama quietly looked downward.

“No, I don’t think that’s the reason. Am I being … deliberately avoided?”

Yuigahama gently raised her face up, asking modestly as if trying to peek into Yukinoshita's heart. Hearing that, Yukinoshita suddenly straightened her body up and switched to a firmer attitude,

"That's not the case. That's not true. It's just that there's so much communication coming in and out about the prom preparations and arguments against the prom event. I've had too many things to deal with…"

She argued vehemently, but then suddenly she softened her voice and looked down. She then lost her words and instead, made a long sigh. Yuigahama gently bit her lip, faced the downward-looking Yukinoshita and apologized powerlessly.

"Em, sure, right. I'm sorry..."

They stayed speechless for a while after that. I felt compelled to say something. So, frustrated with myself, I opened my mouth without carefully crafting words that fit the atmosphere,

"...Hey."

Hearing my voice, Yukinoshita suddenly raised her face while keeping a firm grip on Yukinoshita's hands. Surprised by this situation, Yukinoshita also raised her face. And Yuigahama said,

"I am actually helping Hikki."

That totally caught me by surprise. It left me astonished and speechless at first,

"...oh... Did I not tell you…?"

I mumbled. I thought we kept in touch over LINE somehow, thus I took it for granted that I'd already told Yukinoshita about the fact that Yuigahama is helping me. Keeping Yukinoshita informed should be my responsibility, not Yuigahama's. I regretted and blamed myself so much that Yuigahama ended up having to say it in a terribly awkward situation like this.

Thereupon, Yukinoshita turned her face to me and shook her head, suggesting me not to worry about it. After that, she turned to Yuigahama, firmly gripped Yuigahama's hands in return and said,

"Don't worry about it. I understand."

"... No, I don't think you do."

Yuigahama tilted her face in sadness.

"I was thinking about doing *it* properly. After we're finished with all of this, I will get *it* done properly. Therefore... I will make sure your wish will never come true."

She kept staring into Yukinoshita's eyes, trying to earnestly organize her words. Yukinoshita nodded, just to confirm that Yuigahama had finished her words.

"... I see. But I do hope that your wish comes true, though."

It appeared that her smile was so genuine, without even the slightest sense of sadness, that her words were honest and truthful.

However, Yuigahama's stern face didn't clear up at all after she heard Yukinoshita's words. After two or three breaths, Yuigahama cast a gaze that seemed to cling firmly on Yukinoshita.

"... Do you actually… know my wish? Are you sure you know *it* clearly?"

"Yes. I think it's probably the same as mine."

Yukinoshita replied without any hesitation. Her smile was certainly soaked with love and affection. In her clear pupils was no hesitation or perplexity, whatsoever.

"I see… then... it's okay."

Yuigahama exhaled deeply, released Yukinoshita's hands gently and took a step back. Seeing that her own hands dropped powerlessly, Yuigahama wore a very slight and thin smile on her face.

“Sorry, but I have to leave now.”

While saying that, Yukinoshita firmly doubled her fist with her empty hand. While my eyes said goodbye to Yukinoshita, Yuigahama kept her face down without looking up.

Yukinoshita sighed with a troubled face. Finally, she turned her back on us. Only the sound of loafers hitting the stone ground resonated in the courtyard, and step by step, they went further and further away.

I saw her off with my eyes before taking a short breath. Even so, that didn’t alleviate the heavy feeling that got stuck in my stomach at all.

“It’s about time. Let’s get going.”

I said that to Yuigahama, who stood there still and paralyzed. I don’t think those were the right words to say, but I’m simply too deplorable - I knew I had to say something in this situation, but I just didn’t know what to say.

Yuigahama nodded to me, with an almost vanishing voice “alright...”. But apparently, she had no intention to walk out and leave.

Yukinoshita stepped into the shadow under the school building. I could see her fleeting figure dissolving into the background and her footsteps pitching higher.

Before I was able to see the scene through to the end, Yuigahama suddenly raised her face, and with all her strength, she started dashing over in Yukinoshita’s direction. Yukinoshita was taking her time to walk away slowly, but after hearing the footsteps, she turned her face back.

It all happened in a moment. Yuigahama suddenly jumped onto Yukinoshita, wholeheartedly hugging her. Leaking an almost inaudible voice of surprise and confusion, Yukinoshita stumbled a few steps forward, almost dropping her coat from her back. But before that happened, Yuigahama held onto her coat firmly and quickly buried her face into the slim collars.

“When the prom ends, we should get lunch together. Besides that, I’d like to stay overnight at your apartment again. When spring comes, we’ll

go to Disneyland together; we'll go to the Seaworld again. And after that, we can all stay overnight at my place. And then when it's April..."

With her wavering voice, Yuigahama's words came out so quickly, just like a barrage of arrows. She snorted, then looked up after taking a breath and smiled gently.

"What shall we do in April? We could do all sorts of things. So much to do that it could take us years or decades."

The dimmed orange light that the light poles emitted sank into Yukinoshita's pupils. She relaxed her fist and stretched her hand over to reach Yuigahama's shoulder. She then gently touched Yuigahama's shoulder and tried to cover her face with her other hand touching her forehead.

"That's... that's really a lot to do... I wonder if we can actually do all of them."

"We can! We'll be together until we finish doing all of them... So, it's not a problem."

Being hugged tightly, Yukinoshita sighed in confusion. But Yuigahama did not seem to care. Instead, she put more strength into her arms and asked.

"Do you understand?"

As if she were being playful to a kid, Yuigahama laid her cheek on the back of Yukinoshita's neck to comfort her. Yukinoshita twisted her body a little bit, maybe out of slight shyness.[44]

"Yeah, I understand. I understand it."

"Like really understand it, crystal clear?"

"Yes.. yes. So could you just release me a little bit..."

Yukinoshita did not force herself to part from Yuigahama, and Yuigahama released her slowly and gently. Yuigahama froze briefly after

they drew some distance apart. While I was watching all of this, I made a short sigh.

As usual, we are so bad at communicating with each other. ‘I meant to say this; I meant that I knew this; I meant that I understood this.’ - with thoughts like this piling up among us, we have reached where we are today. I think we haven’t grown mature at all, not even a little bit.

We all know that there’s an easier way to communicate our feelings. However, I do not believe that’s the right way.

But I know I can do one thing at least - avoid making mistakes. As if I was praying, I fixed my eyes on both of them without moving.

6-3

After seeing Yukinoshita off to the Student Council room, Yuigahama and I headed over to the station.

The temperature dropped quickly as the sun set. To avoid the chilly wind, we walked in between the residential buildings. The ‘kyu-kyu-’ sound of me pushing the bicycle got mixed with the buzzing sound of dry wood along the street, both of which gradually vanished in the end.

Along the way, Yuigahama walked next to me and talked about various things, but did not mention anything about Yukinoshita. I think she was deliberately avoiding it. Since Yuigahama clearly had subtle considerations about it, I didn’t touch it either.[45]

Of course, our topic of discussion naturally went in a different direction.

“Soccer club people certainly practice until very late, right?”

“Ah, right, especially today, their training took an even longer time.”

Although our campus isn’t that big, we have the soccer club, the baseball club, the rugby club, and the track and field club, all of which need places to carry out their activities. Hence, they have to coordinate with each other on activity time and places to stay organized.

As I explained to Yuigahama, she made a "hoe-"[46] sound.

“Hmmm, I see. You really know the details.”

“Nah, it’s normal”

It’s not like Yuigahama’s reaction implied anything, but it made me look like I’m really interested in the soccer club. So I ended up coughing once or twice to cover it up and diverted the subject.

“Ah, by the way, tomorrow is the day to take photos, right?”

As I changed the subject intentionally, Yuigahama also redirected her attention and nodded at me.

“Hmm... Taking photos...”

“I was thinking about taking them by the sea. Could you please do me a favor and be the model?”

“Ehhh!? Me!? Ah, that’s kind of embarrassing for me...”

Yuigahama gently caressed her hair bun with her glove.

“It’s okay just to show a back view. I’ve seen quite a few of those kinds of photos. I think it’d be good to have two or three people in the photo like this.”

I held my bicycle aside and took out my smartphone - trying to look up images as references. Yuigahama came closer little by little to peek at the screen.

“I see... It’s just barely safe if it’s from the back... I will try to ask Yumiko and Hina as well.”

Maintaining that close distance, we kept walking side by side. Feeling a little uneasy, I closed my opened coat, brought my scarf all the way up to my mouth and sped up my pace.

Finally, we navigated ourselves through to the front of the station and arrived at the Saizerya storefront.

I parked my bicycle and entered the restaurant, immediately starting to look around for the customer who’d arrived earlier.

I hadn’t been here for only a couple of days. It didn’t look like the place had changed a bit. If I had to say one thing that did change, it’s the Hayama Hayato cheerfully waving his hands at us, with a refreshing smile on his face.

Hayama moved his body to spare some space for us at that 4-person booth. He lifted his hand facing upward as if saying “Here please, my Milady.”

That proud and impertinent pose looked like it could become part of a painting. This made me angry and uneasy. Speaking of which, what's making me even more uneasy is this guy sitting next to Hayama eating pasta with a carefree face...

"Why's Tobecchi here?"

After taking her seat, Yuigahama said it before I could. Meanwhile, Tobe choked on the food and said,

"Ubbeee(crap)-... Should I have not come...? Cuz Hayato told us everyone is grabbing dinner together and so I'm here..."

Scared by the situation, Tobe looked at Yuigahama, who then gently waved her hand and smiled at him.

"Oh, that's not it. You weren't invited, but you ended up coming, anyway..."

Yuigahama didn't seem to say that out of any ill will, but saying that lightly while wearing that smile can certainly cause extra damage. Tobe's mouth suddenly cramped, he awkwardly put down the fork and cast his eyes towards Hayama and me, as if those eyes were saying "Eh? Is this bad? Should I leave? Is it better for me to go home? Ah crap...", in quite an annoying way.

"... Well, it won't make a difference whether you're here or not."

Having said that, I cast my eyes towards Hayama. I could barely see from the side of my vision that Tobe was mumbling "Crap... the way he said that is so... terrible...". Hayama showed a bitter smile to Tobe and turned his face to us.

"I'm sorry for taking your time." Yuigahama closed her palms together to express her apology and gratitude.

"Well, I can't really say no to Yui's request." Hayama smiled and responded. If I were the person asking him, I wonder if I would just get rejected... I cast my dubiously questioning eyes to Hayama. He then simply switched to the main topic.

“So, what’s the deal for today?”

“You know about this so-called ‘prom’ thing, right?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

Just like Isshiki, I guessed Hayama also learned or heard about it from Yuigahama. Hence, I asked him with that in mind. Hayama answered frankly without hesitation. As I nodded in return, I continued,

“So the situation right now is that some of our parents think it’s not wholesome, thus they are strongly against holding the prom. We are cornered now, and we were told to exercise ‘self-restraint’. To deal with it, we unilaterally created this new plan to carry out a prom with an even greater scale.”

As I finished explaining, Tobe suddenly stopped his hand holding his pasta.

“... Wait, what, why??”

“To make sure that the prom takes place.”

I said without looking at Tobe, but straight at Hayama. Hayama folded his arms and then held his chin, silently thinking.

“... in other words, it’s a stalking horse?”

Hearing that, I twisted one side of my mouth and put on an evil smile.

“Your quick understanding makes things easier, thankfully.”

“No, I cannot understand it, to be honest.”

Perhaps confused, Hayama shrugged his shoulders at my smile. Tobe, on the other hand, looked back and forth at us, trying so hard to understand the situation. Yet he looked like he’d just given up, as he leaned forward over the table and asked Yuigahama “What’s going on?” for an explanation. Yuigahama then said, “So, let me think, here’s what’s going on...” and started quietly explaining the whole thing.

Well, it’s okay if Tobe doesn’t understand. The only person that I’m here to deal with is Hayama. I quickly glanced sidelong at the whispering two and then cut to the main topic.

"So, I want some support from the Club President Association."[47]

“I don’t think we can offer any meaningful help. It’s not like we have a great deal of authority or say over school matters.”

“I know. But I’d still like to ask for one thing.”

Just as Hayama was about to say no and just end the conversation, I raised my hand and suggested ‘well, hear me first’.

“You guys are planning this Oikon thing, right? Isn’t it better if all clubs can jointly hold this thing? To follow up and tag along with Oikon, we can make a new prom proposal.”"[48]

“Oikon...”

After finishing up the pasta, Tobe froze his hand again while trying to reach out to the Doria. He tilted his head in confusion and looked at Hayama. Hayama smiled bitterly.

“Looks like you learned about it from somewhere else.”

I looked at Hayama with my questioning eyes asking “what do you mean?”. Hayama reached for his coffee cup and took a sip. It was espresso, but he didn’t show even a slight expression of a bitter taste. He started talking composedly,

“The student council has already reached out and asked us about Oikon.”

Sounds like now I’m the one making a bitter face. Nevertheless, Hayama’s face kept its composure after seeing my reaction and continued,

“We already decided to help out the student council. Or as I’d rather put it, we are a subdivision under the student council. So obviously, we can’t help you guys out.”

“Ugu..”, I lost my words.

They got there before us. While we were still planning, they already got it done... I guess besides enhancing her prom proposal, Yukinoshita had already thought about using some help from the Club President Association.

I don’t know why, but in this world, people all hold this strong belief that sports clubs must be wholesome. Probably like those kinds of old people, whom after committing some light crimes would easily cover them up as some pranks or tricks. They certainly, and strangely, are very tolerant to those young people who are invigoratingly sweating and holding strong passions. In reality, they are not wholesome at all. Every year, they cause turmoil and apologize for things like ‘team activity temporarily halted’, ‘bowing out right before the competition due to scandals’. More recently, there’s even bolder conduct such as sexual harassment, power harassment, drug abuse, and so on.

So it’s annoying if I just end up giving up now. Knowing that my resistance is useless and meaningless, I still have to continue my negotiations. If I don’t, then all my efforts would be for nothing.

“... in that case, how about as an individual? Would Hayama Hayato, as an individual without any titles, be willing to help us out?”

“Helping you out as an individual would be the most unwilling thing I could do.”

Hayama tilted his face, expressing genuine unwillingness deep from his heart. His expression looked like the one that a boxer would make after his liver got punched and gouged out. Okay, now is the time to attack!

“It’s also okay if we can just borrow your name.”

“I doubt I’ll ever have it back.”

“Ah... you’re right...”

Punched right in the face by his sharp and eloquent argument, I dropped my jaw. He’s right. If I got to borrow Hayama’s name I’d use every inch

of it. Just like borrowing a stamp and using it to apply for a loan and buy a house.[49] Good for you Zaimokuza, you get to buy a new apartment!

While I nodded to myself, Hayama looked at me and rolled his eyes.

“I can’t accept this. You are the type of person who would borrow a game, write your own name on it, and even sell it later! I hate that so much.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I wouldn’t do it. I don’t even have a friend who can lend me a game in the first place.”

As I argued fair and square, Hayama sighed deeply. Tobe was like "That's him! Those who use markers to write stuff on goods and resell them on GEO[50] and then mesmerize the buyers... I wonder if Akkun is still okay...[51]"

Instead, Yuigahama dropped her jaw in astonishment. She stared at us speechlessly with her eyes asking “what’s going on right now”. Looking at her unbelievable face, Hayama gently smiled and said,

“What’s up?”

“Ah... I was a little surprised”

Yuigahama looked at, and compared Hayama and me side by side, ‘ehehe-’ laughing happily. Meanwhile, embarrassed Hayama had decided to keep his mouth shut. And then, pretending to sit up straight, Hayama leaned his body aside and moved away from me.

Well, if I had I only known the kind Mr. Hayama Hayato, maybe the posture of ‘repulsed by me’ would somehow end up looking pretty nice. Hayato-san, you have quite a personality.

As I was thinking that, Tobe, who apparently knows Hayama a lot better than I do, proudly straightened up his neck and said,

“Well, it’s because sometimes, Hayato-kun, you do say pretty tough things too.”

Tobe smiled and tried to seek a consensus. Trying to cover up and divert things, Hayama coughed a couple of times.

“To begin with, why do you have to do this? I didn’t hear anything about this ‘stalking horse’ proposal from Yukinoshita.”

“Of course you didn’t. It’s all my unilateral action.”

Hayama leaned his head slightly, with his eyes asking what I meant by that. I didn’t really want to explain to him, so I answered him in only a few words. After that, I stopped elaborating further, resting my chin in my hand. We then entered a brief moment of silence.

“Looks like you two are not working on it together this time... What happened?”

He seemed to notice my unwillingness to elaborate further, following up with yet another question. He didn’t avert his eyes away from me as he asked, but rested his elbows on the table and had his fingers crossed[52]. His attitude looked like he'd wait forever until I gave an answer. I quietly sighed.

“It’s my own business, not something that you should care about.”

The moment I said that, something dark started moving deep inside Hayama’s pupils. His gaze stifled me. Despite that, Hayama shrugged his shoulders.

Hayama didn’t relax his gaze, leaving the atmosphere even drier. I could feel my skin getting stung and burned by his eyes. Perhaps those sitting next to me could also feel the tightened ambiance. Tobe uncomfortably twisted his body.

Yuigahama had her eyes down herself, yet eventually, she decided to open her mouth,

“Yukinon... Yukinon wants to prove that she can do it on her own. Otherwise, she’d end up depending on Hikki and me. She’s decided not to let that happen.”

“...that’s what she said..?”

Hayama swallowed his breath out of discomposure. Just to make sure, he slowly asked again. Without raising her head, Yuigahama nodded.

“I see...”

Hayama sighed deeply and closed his eyes. I couldn’t grasp the meaning behind that long sigh. Only from his action of biting his lips could I tell that he is stressed and troubled.

As the suffocating silence continued, I could sense that the restaurant was getting noisier. Without saying a word, both Yuigahama and I looked down on our hands.

“Ah.... by the way, did you two eat? Are you hungry? Should I order something?”

Maybe Tobe couldn’t bear the awkwardness, or maybe he was reading the atmosphere and trying to do me a favor. Tobe forced his wide smile at us and opened the menu. Yuigahama looked at me implying “what should we do?”. I shook my head in response,

“No, it’s fine. I am about to head out.”

Refraining from putting it into words, I used my eyes and mouth movement to express my gratefulness to Tobe, though I’m not sure if he’d get it. Tobe was like “O, oh...” seemingly confused.

After we broke the silence, Hayama sighed shortly.

“I will help out with the prom itself. However, I will NOT assist you as an individual nor as part of the Club President Association. I won’t dissuade other CPA members from helping out as individuals. That’s my compromise.”

Without looking at me directly, Hayama fixed his eyes on the cup in front of him. Hayama’s pupils reflected darkness and turmoil, and deep inside, there was no light.

“...well, that’s what I guessed. It’s enough.”

As I spoke, Yuigahama looked at me uneasily and anxiously.

“Hikki, are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

I think that it isn’t a problem if the CPA is helping out Yukinoshita. It’s sufficient just to get Hayama’s promise and commitment. After all, my end goal is to make sure Yukinoshita’s prom plan takes place.
They[[53] made their wise move ahead of us, but it won't change the outcome in the end.

In that case, I just have to make use of the other cards in my hand.

“I’m getting ready to leave. Thank you and sorry for taking your time.”

I took the check promptly and left the seat. Hayama was hesitating on whether to stand up or not. He sighed shortly, then he gave up and stood up anyway. Left by himself, Tobe quickly devoured the leftover Doria, poured the remaining coke into his mouth and clumsily chased us.

6-4

After I paid the bill and left the restaurant, night had already fallen.

Due to the commute rush, many people were passing by the station area. I was pushed by the crowd and left alone walking by myself... maybe I should just head to the station for now... hence I ended up catching up with Yuigahama and Tobe while pushing my bicycle.

And then, I heard a voice come from behind,

“Can I borrow just a moment from you?”

“Ugh?”

As I turned around, Hayama was aimlessly standing there. Surprised at us two suddenly stopping our walk, Yuigahama and Tobe looked at us, turned around, and walked back toward us.

Hayama looked at Tobe and nodded with a little eye contact. Tobe picked it up. He stretched his neck and said,

“Ah, hmmm, let me walk Yui home.”

That immediately caught Yui by surprise.

“Ehh?? Why??”

“Why? Ehh, ehhh? Why do you ask?”

While Tobe asked her back, Yuigahama waved her hand,

“Well, it’s not like my home lies in the same direction as yours. I live close by so I can go back just fine as normal.”

“That frankly?? Ah, but normally you should take my offer...”

“Eh, ah, it’s okay, really. Daijoubu.”

“uppee-(crap)... that really hurts...”

Tobe was surprised by the unexpected situation and stood dumbfounded. Yuigahama then took a step towards me and gently raised her hand up,

“See you tomorrow Hikki- and Hayato-kun.”

“Yep, see you tomorrow.”

While I said with a nod, Hayama waved his hand and said, “Good night”.

Yuigahama soon walked away, followed by Tobe chasing her in confusion and dissatisfaction. Seeing both of them off, Hayama and I were left in the crowd. We waited until we could no longer see them. I then turned my face to Hayama,

“...So, what’s your problem?”

“Shall we walk as we speak?”

Dodging my question and not even waiting for me to say yes, he started walking. He didn’t tell me where we were heading to but merely suggested that I follow him. For a while, I followed his steps and pushed my bike without exchanging words.

We walked into a back street one block away from the shopping district and then came out on a corner surrounded by trees. Seemingly an inhospitable place, it’s a park equipped with swings and a playground slide.

“Wait here for a moment.”

“eh, hey...”

I was gonna stop him but he quickly ran away somewhere. It can’t be helped, so I parked my bicycle and sat down on a bench in the gazebo.

There’s nobody here other than me. The park was really quiet. There’s nothing much surrounding the park, leaving the chilly wind blowing freely. I closed up my coat collar, tightened my scarf, and put my hands into my pockets. I waited for Hayama with my body shaking and clattering.

After breathing in and out a couple of times, I heard the sounds of trampled sand coming from behind. I turned around and saw Hayama holding coffee cans and walking back towards me.

“Get ready.”

As he spoke, he threw one of the cans over at me. I quickly took my hands out of my pockets in a panic and somehow managed to catch it.

“That was dangerous... Can’t you just pass it over normally?”

Following my bad attitude, however, was a relieved breath from my mouth. I could feel the warmth transmitting into my palms. ‘Eh, hot!!’ I mumbled. It’s about time to drink, so I opened the can and started drinking, sip by sip.

Hayama, who looked at me, smiled in satisfaction and sat down on the bench next to the one I sat on. He first warmed his hands with the can, and soon also started drinking like me. After a brief sigh, he began to talk in scattered words.

“I’ve come to remember things from the past.”

“What things?”

I peeked at his face from the side. Hayama leaned his body slightly forward and stared at his hand holding the coffee can. The light coming from the street lamps shone on his face, casting shadows on the ground.

“... Things from the past. You know back in elementary school, she was isolated by others, right? Back then, she said something similar... ‘I can just do it by myself. I do not want to rely on you. I do not need your help.’”

“Huh... I felt like I heard that from somewhere, maybe.”

“Yeah... Hence, I came to remember it.”

Acknowledging my back-channeling, half-joking speech, Hayama raised his head up a little bit and replied to me with a smile. Nevertheless, his delightful attitude quickly faded out.

“...I wasn’t able to do anything for her back then.”

Just like his falling voice, his eyes also looked down at the ground.

“No, that’s not accurate. In retrospect, it ended up being a lot worse and awful. I offered my help halfway without wrapping it up, which caused even more damage. I was thinking that back then - I should have helped her and gave it everything I had.”

Hayama cast his self-loathing smile at me, his eyes turning gloomy. I shrugged my shoulders,

“What is this? Repentance? You should do that facing a wall.”

"Am I not?"[54]

Saying it in a half-joking fashion, Hayama, whose face was illuminated by the street lights, lowered his eyelashes with an apologetic face. In contrast to that face, the steel can was shaking in his hand. Some cold wind started to blow at us again, but that’s definitely not why he was shaking.

Besides, I can sense regret and anger leaking from inside him.

I recalled that day in that summer when Hayama and Yukinoshita had a conversation. It’s not like I asked them what they talked about, but at my best guess, it’s probably about what happened to them in the past being repeated exactly as with Tsurumi Rumi, who was likewise isolated.

It’s not hard to imagine the young Yukinoshita Yukino standing out from all the other kids in the crowd, thanks to her beauty, temperament, and intelligence. It’s also easy to imagine how someone as unique and special as Yukinoshita would be treated by the kids’ groups.

In that situation, as Yukinoshita's childhood friend[55], Hayama Hayato took actions that were deemed to be the worst actions that one could ever conceive - in his most straightforward words, he tried to ‘set her up to be friendly with’ and made attempts ‘to integrate her into’ those girl-only groups.

Unfortunately, that only brought him more trouble and displeasure. Of course, what a classic Hayama move, not to mention that it all happened during the time when kids are the most excessively emotional beings. It doesn't make sense to demand self-control from kids, as it simply won't work.

There's no way for me to know whether Hayama back then was smart enough to notice it, but I'm quite sure that the Hayama now would deem his actions as awfully stupid and inappropriate.

"I really should have poured in all my effort to help her out back then. In that case,..."

If that were the case, what would have happened...!? That really touched my nerves. Hence I narrowed my eyes and said,

"What are your 'what-ifs' supposed to be mean now?"

"At the very least, I am very aware, and have made it clear to you, that I'm also unwilling to let her end up like this."

Taking my stares, Hayama laughed bitterly with self-mockery. The usual 'cool and refreshing' part of him was all gone, leaving only gloomy eyes in which only bad feelings and regrets resided.

"You shouldn't give up halfway as I did. Face it seriously. I didn't have that motivation and resolution back then. But you're different, right?"

His words jabbing about the future, his imploring eyes, his mouth that spoke of the past that I didn't know of - all irritated me so much. I bit my teeth hard and said,

"Those were your regrets! You own them. Don't entrust them to me so lightheartedly!"

Without noticing it, my words sharpened, and my eyes angrily stared at Hayama. Hayama then quickly looked down.

"You are absolutely right... I own my own regrets. I have been regretting from the moment it happened until now. I am unable to forget any bit of

it. It always came back to me... I was stuck there ever since, without making any progress."

Suppressing his pain that seemed to tear his chest off, Hayama groaned bitterly. His formerly handsome face warped out of pain, forcing sounds out of his throat as if blood was coming out.

How would those friendly buddies of Hayama have reacted if they saw him now? Disappointed? Or sympathetic? Or even disdainful?

Despite that, I am jealous of him. Looking at his regretful face, I only feel jealousy.

I could see how deep it was inscribed into his mind, as he treasured it so dearly, so much so that he would never forget about it, and keep thinking about it for the rest of his life.

I would not treat that feeling as regrettable at all.

His suffering posture was so 'shiny' that my eyes had to avert away. Hayama thereupon suddenly stepped on the sand and turned his face to me. He couldn't allow himself to look away from me anymore.

"Hikigaya... You're doing it the wrong way. You shouldn't have to resort to this method."

This time, I can't avert my eyes nor can I turn my face away. So I closed my eyes.

Nobody else but you. Nobody else but you said that to me. His words were hopelessly correct, ambiguous, and whatever. I'm glad to know you, Hayama Hayato.

You cannot overlook actions that hurt others. You will not forgive those who hurt others. Therefore, you yourself are the one whom you will never forgive.

He bore the hope that not a single person got hurt, but ended up hurting the most important person. Even so, he couldn't deny or betray his image that he and others have built. In the end, you forced yourself into an

impasse. You showed me that painful face and spoke these meaningless but sound arguments. Even now, you are still hurting yourself.

He knows that he couldn't do it. He knows that I couldn't do it. Nevertheless, he still couldn't help but ask me. I hated this part of him so much, hated it from the bottom of my heart.

I really hated it.

So, I've found my words to say. If it was someone else at that time, I'm sure I wouldn't have said them.

It's because you shared so much sympathy with me, but still didn't understand it, that I have to tell you. I have to say it because they are two things despite being the same; the two are similar but what you can't forgive is the tiny part that's different between the two. Therefore, I have to speak out to someone like you who's committed to never doing the wrong thing and always doing the right thing.

"Shut up! I know what I'm doing!"

I knew I was doing the seemingly wrong thing. But I had no other choice. I did not know of any other way.

Without doing it this way, *we* wouldn't be able to understand or communicate with each other.

There's only one thing I could do.

Only one thing.

"I know that. But while knowing that, I've come this far. There's no other way to prove it."

As I slowly opened my eyes, I saw white steam coming out of my mouth and gradually dissolving into the air, just like what I just said.

"... What are you trying to prove?"

Hayama directed his staring eyes at me. It's troublesome to be asked with that serious face. I haven't been able to provide any good counter arguments.

Should I just fabricate something? Or prevaricate? Or just make a bluff? I thought about it briefly, and eventually just spoke out what I had in my heart.

“If she didn’t demand any help from me, but I’m offering my one-sided help anyway, then this is not codependence. I want to be able to prove that.”

As I said that, I began smiling naturally.

Maybe surprised by what I just said, or maybe even astonished at my smiling face, Hayama blinked his eyes and gave a bitter smile while losing strength in his shoulders.

“Hikigaya, do you know what that feeling is called?”

“Of course, it’s called ‘a guy’s stubbornness’.”

I boasted with my twisted face.

Interlude 5

Though he'd left, I didn't stand up from the park bench.

I have no words to respond with if you tell such a grand lie with that expression.

In the end, we didn't exchange any other words and he drank the rest of his canned coffee, before saying "later" in a small voice that could have been mistaken for the wind, and leaving. Maybe he'd just run away from being unable to bear the embarrassment.

Thanks to that I was left alone in the park.

I hate him after all. I seriously can't forgive myself for having been shaken by those words, even for a moment.

I don't know how many times I've deeply sighed and looked at the phone that remained in my hands. To be honest, I just wasn't in the mood to have to be the one to make the call.

But if I didn't confirm it, neither me, nor him, nor her would be able to move forward. In the words of his grand lie, even I have something called a man's stubbornness.

With my fingers frozen due to being exposed to the blowing wind for a while, I pushed buttons on the phone to make the call. While praying she doesn't even answer the call.

However, she would definitely answer during this time. At the same time as I thought that, the call connected and I heard a long voice coming from the other end.

"Hel–loo"

I replied with the words I'd prepared.

“Can we meet up now?”

“...Yeah. Sure.”

In that short moment of silence, it seemed she’d sensed something. She was as observant as usual, that was seriously troubling. I’d never been able to hide anything from her. It’d surely be the same this time as well.

While having a bad feeling about this, as always, the call quickly disconnected after two, three business-like exchanges.

Interlude 5-2

The designated cafe was the one she'd often used to come to.

After finishing a Blue Mountain, expensively priced from a high school student's perspective, I ordered another cup and looked at my wristwatch.

It was already past the time we'd agreed on. But there hadn't been any contact made in particular from her side.

If I was even a little bit late when she was the one who suddenly called me over, she'd phone over and over to tell me to hurry up. Despite that, this was how it was when she was the one to be late. Because I was used to this, I didn't forcefully call her.

I've asked her once before if she does this with other people as well. She proudly answered, "that's right", but in reality that wasn't the truth. Surprisingly, she was the type of person who was very punctual. There'd been times she'd left far too early to meet up with her friends and she wouldn't thoughtlessly chase them if they kept her waiting.

But it looked like there was just one subset of people that she corresponded with roughly.

It was possible for her to comprehend things like deep affection and trust. In reality, she, and maybe her little sister, tended to be seen in those ways.

It's just that an exception also existed. To those she'd hurt like a toy, she'd see them as nothing more than an existence worthy only for her to sharpen her claws.

While I was lost in thought, the second cup of Blue Mountain was brought to me. Lifting it to my mouth, I felt it was more bitter than it was before.

At last, the sound of a bell mixed in with the mild jazz music playing in the background. When I looked at the entrance, a rouged figure jumped

into the shop at the noir keynote.

When she took off her coat and stated her order at the counter, she didn't even look like she had to look for my figure as she walked straight towards where I was and sat on the seat facing me.

"What's up?"

I lightly shook my head to her question and waited for the Guatemala she ordered to come. When she held the cup in her hands and took a sip, I finally cut into the matter.

"Co-dependence… Did you say that to him?"

Maybe because it was unexpected, it looked like she was slightly surprised. It was so rare for her to show that kind of expression that my mouth broke into a smile. She also laughed, as if to answer my question.

"...You heard that? That's unexpected. So he talks about stuff like that with you."

I ended up thinking about how I should interpret the meaning of that smile. Was she simply just amused by the unexpectedness of his actions, or could it be she was laughing in contempt at the fact he would tell that to someone like me?

Either way, whichever way, it wasn't me who was the subject of interest, but him. That's why I should have been talking about him, not about me.

"No, he just said it in regards to another matter… But I had an idea of someone who would instigate him into purposely using that word."

"Not bad, super detective. You're correct."

Though she spoke like it was a joke, the depths of her eyes were ever so cold. Her gaze told me she was obviously displeased at me interfering. It was a sign telling me to stop, while she was only half teasing. I dropped my gaze to the coffee cup in my hand as soon as I saw it.

"Why would you do something like that…"

"But it's the truth."

With a reverberating tone, and without losing any composure, she spoke as if she was having fun. Only seeing her gestures with her long fingers at the edges of my field of vision, I let out a thin sigh.

“They were fine as they were. Just like that, little by little…”

“Isn’t that just a sham? I only want to see the real thing.”

A cold voice interrupted me. I was probably the only one who could feel it sounding like a sulk. Because we've been together for a long time, I could have just been imagining it on my own. But even so, only I could understand.

As the coffee warmed my chest, I lifted my face and stared into her eyes.

“I think there are feelings that can grow from there.”

“Impossible. That’s how it was, no?”

She slowly narrowed her eyes and pierced through me with her frozen glare. The way she said it overlapped with what she’d said that summer.

That glare, that voice, they’ve always tied me down. In the end, I’m unable to move forward and she was again stopped in place.

It never changes. To make sure nobody could hurt the things she held dear any further, she’d hurt it first herself. And she would never forgive anyone that hurt it; not a single person.

“Do you… hate __ that much?”

I didn’t ask who she hated.

As if she was caught off guard, she blinked her eyes. But she soon smiled as if she was satisfied.

“No, I like __ very much.”

She rested her chin on her hands, looked up at me with her moist eyes, and smiled alluringly with her light crimson lips.

This is a curse.

I just couldn’t get an opportunity to atone.

That’s why I pushed it onto him. At least they would be able to.

Ah, I’m sincerely envious.

They are beings that can’t not be together, and there would be nothing that could make them happier even if they fell into hell together.

Even if it was a sham, if there was only one distorted sham in this world, then nobody should be able to call it a fake.

If, just if I put a hand on it, I’d surely give this distorted shape one name.

That’s why I’m still regretting to this day.

That time, if I’d helped with everything I had.

If I’d done that...

Would you have forgiven me?

Chapter 7: What scenery Ebina Hina sees beyond the lens of her eyeglasses.

I hate going to school.

Or rather, I really hate going to the classroom.

To put it more accurately, I seriously hate seeing Hayama Hayato.

Or even more precisely, every time I meet Hayama, my body becomes uneasy and I stammer. But on the other hand, he just acts normally as if there's nothing awkward at all. I absolutely hate this.

Nope.

If I have to spit out the truth from my heart, it's seeing him wearing a normal face, yet suddenly noticing him showing a somehow hurt face from the side that - in a flash - vanishes. The fact that I even noticed his series of expressions is absolutely disgusting for me.

Because we parted from each other yesterday without having finished our statements, but instead merely made excuses, I wasn't able to identify the kind of reaction he had - he opened his mouth widely, with a surprised face as if seeing some endangered species. I knew he was going to soon say something very annoying, so I quickly ran away from the scene.

In the morning at the classroom, as I looked furtively at the window in the back, I could see Hayama and others chatting cheerfully as usual. I laid my face down on the desk immediately.

The scene there hadn't changed a bit from the usual one, where the sunlight poured into the room through the window, accompanied by cheerful conversations and delightful happy faces.

However, just for a fraction of a second, on that overflowing smiling face, I sensed a tiny bit of worry and anxiety.

Perhaps there wasn't that much to read from his smile, or perhaps it was simply that very same pleasant smile that Hayama wears all the time just as usual.

In that case, that tiny bit of worry and anxiety might just be my own interpretation that I read and forced upon him at my own will. Or maybe it simply came from within myself.

For this reason, I did not want to have any proper conversation with Hayama at all.

I noticed that even though I pretended not to see it, in the end, I couldn't resist but see through it so clearly. A sense of disgust began to spring up in my heart. Maybe Hayama was feeling the exact same thing as I was.

Therefore, in the end, Hayama and I kept on further misunderstanding each other, without genuinely looking into each other's eyes, merely finding mistakes with the other, and angrily conflicting with each other.

Because of the above realization, I decided to firmly resist casting my eyes towards Hayama.

Well, actually that wasn't entirely as bad a thing as it sounded. Thanks to this, I was able to confirm one thing. Putting it into words made me further solidify my intentions to carry it out.

I wanted to brag and talk big about a man's stubbornness.

So I idled my time away without looking at Hayama at all.

I raised my head from the desk and peeked at the wall clock. I sighed deeply as I could not remember how many times I'd repeated this action. I stared at the hands of the wall clock and felt like they'd been moving a lot slower than usual.

Though I was sitting at my own seat, I felt rather uneasy, and only wanted school to end as soon as possible.

7-2

Come on, end of class, please come now!

Even though I had been praying for it, when the end-of-class bell actually rang I immediately dashed out of the classroom and went to the Game Club room; there, I made an even deeper sigh.

It all began with my briefing,

“...Eh, so, Hayama said he won’t help us.”

As soon as I remembered yesterday, I couldn’t help but make a bitter face. Yet it looked like everyone else's faces turned even more bitter.

“Whaat...”

“We’re done for...”

"We have finally reached the end of our rope..."[56]

Hatano and Sagami both frowned and Zaimokuza sighed very deeply with a troubled face. Only Yuigahama bitterly smiled to try to comfort them.

“Well, it’s okay... We still have yet to talk to Kaihin-Sougou HS. Right, Hikki-?”

“That’s correct. So, let’s contact them first.”

As I talked, I quickly turned my face to Yuigahama. However, while dropping her hands loosely under the table, Yuigahama tilted her head in question,

“W...what?”

“Eh, um, their contact...”

“...Huh? You are asking me? I thought you knew, Hikki-?”

While still keeping her head tilted, this time she leaned her head in the other direction.

Then, silence fell.

It all happened in a flash - our eyes met and crossed - I quickly turned my eyes to Zaimokuza, who then looked at Sagami, who turned his head and nodded at Hatano, who threw his stares back at me. After our eye contacts made a loop, I turned my attention back to Yuigahama.

“I see, you really don’t know it... I don’t quite want to reach out to them, myself... would they consider it awkward if I suddenly called them...?”

Yuigahama sighed, seeming slightly exhausted, then took her smartphone from her pocket.

It’s all right. It’s all right. All guys have undergone this exact same problem that you are experiencing at this moment. In any case, it would definitely be considered awkward. “What’s up with this dude suddenly asking me what’s covered in the assignment...”, - all girls think like this. Hence, I cast a warm, comforting gaze to Yuigahama, who then looked at me and said,

“Speaking of which, Hikki-, don’t you have... Orimoto-san’s contact?”

“I deleted it.”

“You dele...”

After hearing my immediate response, Yuigahama immediately froze her hand holding her smartphone and went completely speechless.

“Normally you would delete those right away after graduating from middle school, right? It’s not like I’ll see them ever again. I don’t want to waste the memory space.”

“That’s not normal at all!”

I spat out my words but Yuigahama immediately denied them. Nevertheless, the other guys showed very little response. Actually, they

all sympathized with my verdict and nodded their heads together. Yuigahama then looked at them, then looked again, then the third time.

“Wait, what!? Am I the weird one here?”

Yuigahama clasped her head firmly.

“But didn’t you exchange your contact information with Orimoto-san back then?”

“... yeah, just in case... I was kind of acting as the point of contact during the Christmas event. But it’s not like we talked to each other much either...”

Yuigahama’s voice weakened as she continued to speak, with her shoulders dropping downcast.

Actually now, come to think of it, Yuigahama backed us up and acted as a point of contact for us in various matters. She was also responsible for managing money related stuff if I remember correctly. However, since we couldn’t have a proper conversation with those Kaihin-Sougou guys *at all*, we decided to instead reach out to those girls centered around Orimoto. I had no idea how many times Yuigahama had met Orimoto in person, nor have I seen the two of them having a friendly conversation. If anything, I think they had more awkward encounters than normal ones.

Communication Monster Yuigahama and Yes-woman Orimoto might not actually get along with each other. Well, that’s because their first encounter was kind of an accident... Well, it couldn’t be helped... By the way, it was all Hayama’s fault! Preach it!! Eh well not quite, it’s not like I was blameless for it... Having realized this, I decided to bring up my suggestion in a low voice.

“If you give me her contact, I’ll send the message.”

Thereupon Yuigahama looked up from her smartphone, on which she hadn’t typed a single word yet, and turned her eyes to me with a swollen cheek.

“Hikki-, you don’t even use LINE.”

’Ugu’, I was tongue-tied immediately. Kids these days... Their way of communication is already all high-tech stuff. Actually no, I also wished to use those Precure stamps too. However, due to my lack of contacts, I’m perfectly fine at the moment not using LINE.

Well, I felt sorry to Yuigahama for having to let her take the responsibility. Seeming to be a little bit troubled, Yuigahama began typing and composing her message on LINE. As I was looking at Yuigahama doing her job, I heard some grumbles coming from nearby,

“How does this guy live a normal life without using LINE...”

“What a primitive man living in the stone age... A Chiba primitive man...”

“This guy loves Chiba so much that he hasn’t evolved a single bit from Chibanian. Because of the reversal of terrestrial magnetism, he doesn’t use LINE or any messaging app. He has only been using carrier mail so far.”

“That’s not true! I also use WebMail and SMS.”

I quickly jumped up and argued against them. The three of them all were puzzled.

“I haven’t been using mail service at all lately...”

“Speaking of Jomon people, is the local one here called Kasori Midden?

“Hmm, looks like the time has advanced a little bit. Let’s start using Hachiman pagers!”

The three glasses burst with laughter while talking mindlessly, not caring about the fact that they were being offensive to me. I knew that Hatano says terrible things all the time, but now Sagami was also being a terrible human being. Even his sister is cuter that way... That’s a joke.

No no, this isn’t the right time to care about any of this.

Let me see. I looked to my side to see how the contact effort had been going. While mumbling “ok, ok” at the same time, Yuigahama kept

typing sentences on her phone.

“So... what should I ask them?”

“For now just send them the prom proposal file as an attachment. Tell them that we want to set up a meeting with them with regards to the proposal as soon as possible. You could tell them to bring up the schedule for either today, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow.”

“File as an, attach,..., attachment?”

Yuigahama just chanted ‘File as an attachment’! Yuigahama was in great confusion! It’s true that the name sounded a little parupint-ish... O’ Yuigahama-san seemed to have no idea how to send a file as an attachment. Then no wonder that she didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘attachment’.[57]

Sagami could not stand to see this happen and pushed his glasses straight. He then politely asked,

“Ah, you have to upload it to the cloud first. What cloud storage service do you use?”

“Sto...rage?”

Yuigahama waved her head left and then right, while Hatano made a long sigh and shook his head.

“She’s hopeless... She definitely doesn’t understand anything... Shall we upload it to Dropbox or something?”

“Hmm... It might be easier for her to understand if we just do a File Transfer since we only need to give her the link.”

“Ah, that’s true. Let me borrow the computer.”

Zaimokuza crossed his arms and thought hard with his head tilted. To that, I snapped my fingers and pulled over the Game Club laptop on the long table. I swiftly uploaded the proposal to some file transfer server and obtained the link. In addition, I further composed the message that asked for the schedule and sent it over to Yuigahama.

“Here, just copy and paste it.”

“O...okay... At least I know how to copy and paste.”

Showing a relaxed expression, Yuigahama smiled gently at me and immediately went back typing on her smartphone. We just stayed there and we all stared at her. Finally, ‘fuu~’, Yuigahama sighed in exhaustion.

“Was it sent?”

“Yep, just now.”

Yuigahama smiled bashfully while fondling her hair bun. And then, everyone broke out in smiles of satisfaction. What is that feeling of being the Princess of an Otaku Club...[58] Even that Zaimokuza racked his brain in order to assert his usefulness. Gahama-san, what a formidable girl!

Anyhow, we just had to wait for the response.

Meanwhile, I checked out the website that they made and exclaimed, “Looks really good! Looks so good that I want to try three more designs! Just let me see it by next Monday and it’s fine!” and etc - what was this stupid business-client game we’re playing?

Suddenly, Yuigahama’s smartphone vibrated.

“Did it come?”

“No, it didn’t. It’s Yumiko. She asked when to meet?”

Yuigahama covered her lips with her smartphone and looked at me. It was about our request to ask Miura to serve as a model in our photographs.

“Since the sunset takes place at 5:30 PM, let’s convene at 4:30. We could get our hands ready and then wait for the evening glow before we start taking photos.”

“Okay.”

As I finished talking, Yuigahama immediately started typing. I looked at her sideways and then turned my eyes to look beyond the window.

Just according to my research yesterday, today's weather should be clear.

There were some clouds here and there, but perhaps they'll be great for creating a beautiful evening glow.

After I stared at the setting sun for a while, I promptly began preparing for the photo shoot.

7-3

Soon after the sunset, the wind by the seaside turned more chilly and the smell of the tides got stronger. The mild ripples hit the shore, bounced back, and emitted twinkling lights.

Being forced to squint my eyes due to the burning red evening glow, I put down the belongings that I held in hand onto the beach with a thud. We decided to use the gazebo a little farther from the beach as our preparation spot, and there we began our photography preparations.

We borrowed a washtub and a couple of thermal pots from the school, and heavily placed them all on the ground along with a few body warmers that we bought from a 100-yen shop. This beach is used as a seaside resort during summer times and is well-equipped with facilities like shower rooms. But in this season, it didn't look like it was serving that purpose at all. For this reason, just in case someone got wet or dirty, we had to rely on our own washtub and warm water to gently wash off the ocean water and sand. We also prepared a good amount of hot water to serve our dear models.

Zaimokuza, who helped move stuff here with us, awkwardly cast his eyes at me.

"What a strong Assistant Director ability you have!"[59]

"That's not quite right. I wish we had blankets and bigger bench coats..."

...and tents, and a fire stand... Maybe, it's finally about the time for me to prepare for Solo Camp[60]. After all, we were talking about bringing girls out into this place of chilly wilderness. We needed to, at the very least, get this equipment ready. We wanted to be perfect in our preparations for this kind of cold weather, but unfortunately, due to lack of support and money, we couldn't. So as I spoke, Zaimokuza held his coat collar tighter.

"I.. I won't give you this coat!"

"No need, thank you..."

Even I was sickened by him. If he said that to a girl, that'd be much grosser. Well, let me check out how the models were doing for now. So I looked in the direction of the bench, and saw Miura Yumiko trembling, holding her arms crossed tightly, and rubbing herself frequently.

"Damn! Cold, cold, cold! Yui, the body warmer, body warmer, body warmer!"

"Behind? Or the front?"

"Both!"

Miura rolled up the hem of her blazer and showed the back of her blouse. There, Yuigahama stuck the body warmers one after another. The scene looked too immoral and indecent to me so I sensed that I just saw something that I shouldn't be seeing[61]. Welp, I was paying very close attention, though.

However, it looked like they were already done with their preparations.

I let Zaimokuza watch over our stuff and headed towards the girls with the camera in hand.

"I'm really grateful for your cooperation. It really helps."

"...huh??"

After seeing me lowering my head slightly, Miura expressed perplexity on her face. She gazed at me intently, as if she just saw a muntjac wandering in a city. Hey, it wasn't that surprising, okay? Recently in Chiba, the number of muntjacs also seems to have increased a lot, so many that they always roar "Kyon-kun! Kyon-kun!".[62]

"Yoroshiku-!"

Ebina stood aside and waved her hands gently at me with a delightful smile. Hearing her voice, Miura froze for a while but soon came back to herself.

"...ah, um, well. I was asked by Yui, so."

She averted her face away as if trying to peek at Yuigahama. She explained curtly while pulling her curly hair. Probably because of the sunset, her face wore a slight flush. Oh well, oh well! It looked like she was feeling shy and embarrassed, hehehe...

Hold on, now's not quite a good time to be amused by the situation. We only have so much time before the sun submerges under the horizon.

"So let's get started, okay?"

"Ah, okay."

Yuigahama responded to me with a nod, turned her urging eyes to Miura and Ebina, and started walking along the beach. After noticing the feeling that I was trampling sand into my shoes, I decided to follow her.

Immediately after the tide hit the beach, I told them to stop briefly, then took a few steps back and held up the camera.

First of all, let me determine the composition of the photo.

Using the wide angle lens, the evening glow should be captured as its main big subject, with the glowing sky reflected and the pale ocean along the bottom line. The lens was set to focus on somewhere slightly above the horizon line. Right in front were the darkened sand and beach, followed by the shoreline dyed in orange, and then the molten-red cloud that created a gradation effect. Yuigahama and Miura's back views were shown with a slight bokeh effect to the right of the photo.

Two maidens stood side by side before the evening glow, yet each with a different pose.

Miura left her hands in her pockets and stared afar at the sunset ocean view in awe; whereas Yuigahama turned her body slightly around in my direction as if she was caring about something here.

As I pressed the shutter many times, I directed their standing positions with my hand gestures, and also took some effort to change my own shooting positions. Meanwhile, since the air was quite freezing, both of them wore their coats and tracksuit pants below their skirts... Hmm, it

looks quite good this way... I felt like I'd just infiltrated into an all-girl high school!

As I was thinking that while peeking into the viewfinder, Miura complained "Eh, so cold!" loudly enough that I could hear her. She turned around and angrily stared at me.

"Hikio-, quickly!"

"Yes..."

I held up the camera again.

The evening glow was drawn and sank into the clouds.

I tried to take a few photos, but none of them so far were satisfactory.

I bore the reference photo and its composition in mind while hitting the shutter button, but for some reason, I still couldn't capture it well enough in the frame.

On a sun-setting beach, girls wear school uniforms standing side by side - it should be as simple as that, but I still couldn't turn it into a photogenic scene. Honestly, I don't think it'll ever look attractive. I would like to have it look like something that could be printed on a H.I.S. pamphlet titled 'Graduation Trip in Hawaii', or like some cover photo for 'We were here'.[63]

While I was holding the camera and scratching my head, Ebina suddenly showed up from behind.

"Can I borrow it?"

As she said that, she just took the camera from my hand.

"Here, do it this way."

She returned the camera to me after hitting the shutter button a few times. When I looked at the preview, it turned out to be precisely the composition I had in mind.

"Oh wow, looks so professional...!"

“Right!?”

I couldn’t hold back my exclamation but I had to express it. Ebina straightened up her chest proudly.

“A~l~s~o~”

Perhaps because of her good mood, Ebina hummed happily and ran towards Yuigahama and Miura. And then, she suddenly surprised them with an assault, stripping off both their coats and pants.

“Dyufufufufufu. Isn’t that better? Isn’t that better?”

“Baka baka baka! Ebina, you really are...”

Ebina pressed the resisting Miura even harder - taking off her shoes and was about to even remove her socks. Is she a Datsueba?[64] The scenery in front of me almost unfolded into a Rashoumon-like situation.

“Let me do it myself. I said I’ll do it myself!”

Yuigahama distanced herself from Ebina by a few steps, and took off and threw away both her shoes and socks. Miura failed to resist Ebina, who’d pressed Miura down on the ground and removed her socks.

Thereupon I was able to respectively behold dear Miss Miura’s feet. I felt like I was also able to peek into her skirt for a glance, but I quickly turned my face away from her and pushed the shutter button. Hey, it’s not like that! It was merely out of instinct and I just unconsciously pressed the shutter button again and again!

“So cold!”

“Cold, cold, eh, sand’s so cold!”

Yuigahama pattered on the ground rapidly, while Miura trembled and was bewildered by this fresh surprising situation.

“Fufufu. Of course, as I expected, naked feet are the best, together with girls wearing school uniforms by the sea!”

Ebina made a satisfied smile and walked back towards me. I know right... I nodded at her. Ebina held out her hands to me - seems like she's offering to take photos! Thank goodness. It's best to just entrust the job to those who possess photographic skills and sense!

I obediently handed the camera over to her. After mumbling some terms like 'daytime synchronization of the light flash', 'the subject's depth of field' and such, Ebina held up the camera.

"Okay---! Ready?"

After hearing the call, Yuigahama and Miura stood still by the sea. Perhaps because it was so cold, they naturally stuck even closer to each other. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Yuigahama held Miura's hand and said something to her in a low voice. Due to the distance and the wind noise, I wasn't able to catch any of it.

However, with their smiles that were decorated by secrets passing back and forth - that picturesque scenery was so extraordinarily beautiful that it rendered me stunned and speechless.

It was a short moment after the day ended, but right before night fell. The time that we were spending now was perhaps already beyond our imagination and comprehension.

As I was being charmed by the moment, Ebina sighed quietly and put down the camera.

"Later, let's take some casual photos. Both of you can go romp freely now!"

Ebina shouted at those two, then handed the camera back to me. It looks like I need to take the photos from now on. 'Don't stop the shutter!' as I was told that, I had no choice, but to obey her. So I started taking pictures of the romping two.[65]

"Yui, you're getting me wet, you're getting me wet! Yabai yabai yabai!"

"Wait for me, wait for me!"

Miura and Yuigahama ran along the shoreline. Whenever the tide hit the beach, they would scream ‘hyai hyai!’ and ran away in a fuss.

“Yep yep, all good photos...”

While I was taking photos, Ebina next to me was already taking photos herself with her smartphone without my notice.

“By the way, you were also called here to be a model!”

"Ehh? It's beautiful enough already with just you two. I am too rotten to be a model!"[66]

“Ah...”

“Well, speaking of models, I think Hikitani-kun and Hayato-kun were also good choices in my opinion. Ah, that’s rotten...! And there, with Hayato-kun he begins to...!”

Rotturbing... Eh no! Ebina giggled disturbingly, secretly peeked at me, and promiscuously loosened her lips.

“Is this a kind of sexual harassment?”

As I said that and backed away three steps from her, Ebina leaned straight back, and exclaimed in exaggeration,

“There’s no problem at all! I’m not that sexy after all. I am not sure if sexual harassment from someone who isn’t sexually appealing can be still be called that way.”

“What kind of explanation is that? I can’t really answer you... isn’t it still sexual harassment?”

I really had trouble answering Ebina, since I’ve never treated her as someone who’s attractive. By the way, now come to think of it, I felt like I started to think of her that way, though! That way!

That’s true. I still have no idea how to respond correctly to a girl saying things like “it’s because I’m not cute~”. I bet in most cases flattery like,

“that’s not the case at all!” should work. Yet I felt like the same scenario wouldn’t quite apply in the case of Ebina Hina.

While I was having trouble coming up with a proper response, Ebina directed her eyes to the far horizon. And then, gently suppressing her skirt, she lowered her body and squatted down, resting her head on top of her knees. She then started mumbling in short words,

“... this is kind of annoying to me...”

“What’s annoying?”

“Love, affection, sex, and so on...”

“Eh, well... I’m getting really embarrassed, and I don’t really want to talk about that right now, though.”

I quickly turned my face away. After hearing her say it in a serious tone, so frankly and without any reservations, I started feeling quite uneasy and embarrassed. To me, it didn’t sound like a philosophical discussion at all, but simply a half-hearted talk about reality. It wasn’t really a topic that I was fond of.

Nevertheless, after hearing my response, Ebina shook her shoulders and smiled gently.

“Since we aren’t interested in each other at all, technically we can talk about it right?”

“... well, that’s true...”

After being told that way, I couldn’t make any denials.

In a way, I trust Ebina Hina’s way of keeping her distance from others - not as far as strangers but not too close to be called friends. She placed herself in a sweet spot where relationships, like those of an acquaintance or a neighbor, were not easily breakable.

While keeping a distance that absolutely wouldn’t close, Ebina continued talking on her own,

“Well, everything will be fine in the end, right?”

“What are you referring to?”

I was a little bit afraid of asking something that was ambiguous or off-point, and thus getting ignored by her, so I phrased my question more concisely.

“After all, Hikigaya-kun is different from me.”

Perhaps I’d heard the very same cold voice somewhere else. I couldn’t really see her eyes when she looked at Miura and others, but even so, I could tell that deep beyond her glasses, were her abysmal pupils that looked like a deep sea.

“...did you hear anything?”

When I asked her, she finally turned her eyes to me.

“From whom? About what?”

Her pupils were so cold that they did not reflect any colors of the sunset. Nevertheless, she broke into a smile as if she was teasing me. That made me feel slightly uncomfortable. I lightly shrugged my shoulders and looked down to the camera in my hand.

“Never mind. Nothing actually.”

After I dodged her questions, Ebina turned her eyes back to the shoreline, where Yuigahama and Miura were still running back and forth like puppies.

“... I just observe you normally, and I get *it*. In some sense, I’m also involved in it. I’ve heard things from Yui as well.”

As I expected, you did hear things...

That was the reason why you wanted to talk to me. I had no idea what she’d heard and how she heard it and I had no intention to ask her for further explanations.

However, I was a bit concerned by her stating that she just observed me normally and understood. I don’t think I’m such a simple-minded human being. It’s also slightly annoying and unsettling that she was able to

understand the situation so easily. After all, I put a lot of effort into thinking and planning all this, but then you talked to me as if you had seen through everything - this is making me quite uneasy...

Despite that, people always say ‘spectators see most of the game.’ It’s true that sometimes bystanders can unexpectedly understand the situation much better than we can. Even more so if that bystander is Ebina Hina.

However, I didn’t want to ask her too attentively. So I put on a poker face and asked her casually while pretending to operate the camera.

“... when you say *it*, do people all get *it* and understand *it*?”

“Needless to say, Hayato-kun does, right? While Tobecchi is too kind of... that... to get it. I don’t really care about the others... As for Yumiko..., let me stop here right now.”

“Huh, what is that? That sounds scary...”

I totally forgot to keep putting on the poker-face and instinctively looked in her direction. Ebina then laughed gently as if she meant to imply something from it. Once she was done laughing, she looked sideways at me.

“It’s not like I have any idea why things ended up this way, nor am I qualified to comment on them. In any case, isn’t there an easier way to approach it?”

I smiled bitterly at her words.

I was always being told the same thing by someone. Actually, by everyone.

Even one sentence is definitely enough to solve and end the problem.

Nevertheless, as simple and easy as it sounds, I would never allow it to be said.

“The easiest thing is the hardest. To me, what I’m doing now is the easiest method.”

As I finished my words, Ebina turned her face to me and stared at me.

“Pfumm, gross.”

“...eh, okay.”

Being blatantly told so in such an uninterested voice, I dropped my shoulders. Well, I’m well aware of how gross I am, so I have nothing to complain about.

Yet Ebina’s face didn’t show as much disgust as her words did and it was still filled with her smile.

“Well, I can sort of get it. I don’t really hate this kind of pessimism.”

I nodded in response without speaking a word, and then cast my eyes to the surface of the ocean where the evening sunlight glamorously glittered.

Perhaps our philosophies are similar after all. Giving excuses such as ‘I am rotten from the inside’ and so on, and putting up a facade that we both painted and solidified in front of others - it’s because of these parts of ours that we can sympathize with each other.

If I had to explain my actions in the words of Ebina, then the answer would probably be something similar to pessimism. I wouldn’t say it’s the correct way, but it also wouldn’t diverge too much from the right one. That tiny little nuance helped me confirm that.

Ebina and I were different, indeed. Although we sympathized with each other, we reached different conclusions. This distance, in some sense, was similar to the one between Hayama and me.

Despite being similar, or close, or seemingly the same, they were in fact different. Over the past year, I had been trying to confirm that.

Perhaps, she and I are again, the same.

Instead of correcting Ebina’s statements, I chose to stay silent. It was meaningless to try to correct it at this point.

Mixed with the noises of the tide were their voices of happiness and enjoyment.

“Ebina-! Let’s take-”

“-photos together!”

Miura and Yuigahama waved their hands widely at the shoreline and called Ebina loudly. Maybe it’s because they’ve been running here and there, but although the air that they breathed out turned white, and their cheeks were dyed in red, they definitely didn’t feel cold at all; or rather, that was the only warm place.

“Yeah, coming-”

After being called out, Ebina quickly stood up and quickly peeked at me and the camera in my hand. She gently tucked her hair, which was trimmed down to her shoulders behind her ears, and smiled at me as if saying ‘Yoroshiku’ to me. She then immediately pattered towards them.

After seeing her off, I held up the camera.

7-4

On the day following our photography event, the weather was still clear.

The sun had already risen high, with the sunlight penetrating through the gap between the curtains and eventually burning my eyelids.

Today is March 3rd, Saturday. 10 days before the graduation ceremony.

More importantly, today is ‘sister of the world’ Hikigaya Komachi’s birthday.

Despite that, my schedule was fully occupied from the morning to the evening.

Normally I would prepare a luxurious present full of my love for Komachi’s sake and celebrate her birthday with a grand party. Unfortunately, for the past few days, I was preoccupied and postponed due to a series of dummy-prom-related matters. Hate it! I hate work...! As usual, I wanted to spit out this feeling of hatred and roughness. But this time, since I acted out of my own will to take on all this work myself, this time I swallowed back all the pain, cheered myself on and suddenly jumped out of the bed. This is the road that I chose to walk on, so it’d be quite wrong to grumble about it afterward. Given that I was my own employer, all the complaints and pains that I grumbled about and words that I cried out would ultimately get sent back to myself. In other words, self-employment is indeed very tough.

While my brain spun as if covered by the mist that arose from a couple of tiresome days, I headed over to the washroom. Even though the date has changed, the cold water that I splashed over my face hadn’t turned warmer at all. I then forced my eyes to open.

I quickly turned my eyes to the clock - it was already past 9 o’clock. If I didn’t hurry, then I’d probably miss the meetup soon. I climbed up the staircase, rushed back to my room and took the school uniform that hung on the wall. I quickly put my arms through the sleeves, grabbed my bag and hurried downstairs.

I was thinking about saying goodbye first before leaving the house, so I peeked into the living room and saw Komachi - who was still wearing pajamas, lazily watching TV while sticking her feet inside the kotatsu.

It looked like my parents were still soundly sleeping at the moment. In the living room, besides Komachi, there was also Kamakura sleeping by the window in the sunshine, making a quiet snoring noise from his nose.

“So, I’m about to head out...”

“Alright, Itterasshai!”

I put on my coat as I spoke, whereas Komachi just slowly waved her hands without looking in my direction and Kamakura hit the ground with his tail.

This scene didn’t feel any different from a usual weekend. Although it was her birthday, she didn’t seem to have any particular reaction to it. On the other hand, I was so impressed that the field was so moistened with this much irrigation. Well, that’s a different kangai though.[67]

Nevertheless, no matter how impressed by the scene I was, I was still poorly prepared for any Komachi birthday celebration whatsoever. Recently, even our dinner table conversations have been contaminated by topics related to my work. So needless to say, I hadn’t had the chance to talk to Yuigahama about buying a birthday present for Komachi.

Even if I wanted to celebrate her birthday after coming back home, I don’t think I had the time, nor the money, nor the spirit to carry it out. Maybe Komachi didn’t care about it so much, but for me, I’d feel extra uneasy if I don’t at least say a word about it.

“Ah... Komachi, happy birthday.”

I coughed a couple of times as I said so in a low voice. If I had said so while looking straight into Komachi’s face I’d be really embarrassed, but thank god Komachi was facing somewhere else... As I thought that, Komachi reversed her body and laid down on the ground.

Then she rolled on the ground for a couple turns, and while still lying on the ground, she rested her chin on her hands and giggled.

“Onii-chan, thank you!”

Just a few seconds ago, she was facing away from me as if she wasn’t paying attention to my words at all. But as soon as I congratulated her, Komachi showed her happy smiling face to me. Unable to resist that kawaii face, I also broke into a smile. As soon as I did, Komachi again laughed with her nose - hmph hmph hmph... with her nose!? I cast my eyes at her in doubt. She then restlessly began talking,

“Pretending that everything was just like usual, as if nothing was happening, but as soon as I heard Onii-chan’s congratulations, I quickly turned super cheerful... That scored very high in the Komachi standard!”

That’s true... If you hadn’t said that, it would have scored even higher though... But I already knew that this was Komachi’s world-class way of hiding her shyness. Because of this, I was about to have a very tough time saying the following words,

“So, as for today’s arrangements...”

“Yep, I totally understand. Don’t worry about it!”

Komachi nodded and smiled gently.

“Yui is waiting for you, right? So hurry up!”

“... how do you know?”

I didn’t say anything about today’s arrangements to Komachi, though... so as I asked her in surprise, Komachi grabbed her smartphone, and started flicking the screen.

“At 12 am I got the HBD message from her, then, she just told me about it.”

“Ah, I see...”

Komachi phrased it as if it wasn’t anything impressive, but that genuinely scared me. How scary it is to have my movement leaked from some other source to my sister! Is it not scary? Hey, speaking of which, Gahama-san, you seem to be telling various things to Komachi. I would

really like to learn about the entire network - the source, and the destination of this network of connections... However, I'd rather not get into trouble for asking about it the wrong way... a guy's complicated issues!

As I was moaning to myself, Komachi bent backward, lifted one finger and laughed, 'fu fu fu',

"I would love to enjoy a birthday celebration and I also really appreciate receiving presents. But I'm okay with delaying them until everyone is together."

"...ah, right.."

As I responded, I suddenly began thinking to myself.

'Everyone'... Who was she referring to? I could somehow guess, but I have zero confidence in my ability to grant her wish.

Maybe she was a little bit surprised by my voice that unconsciously ended up going down in the end; Komachi looked at me while still resting her head on her hands. Her eyes were raised up as if trying to look for something. Our eyes met. I couldn't help but begin to wear a bitter smile on my face. Komachi shrugged her shoulders and began murmuring,

"Well, I'm okay if not everyone can come. I even consider it barely safe, in the worst case scenario, to only have only Onii-chan present."

Her voice was filled with warmth. Thanks to that, I was able to wash off the stiffness on my face and responded to her with a light laugh,

"The worst case scenario...eh? *barely* safe?"

"I meant whatever, I don't really care much. By the way, don't make Yui wait!"

She waved her hand at me to urge me to leave quickly and then started rolling back again. I sighed deeply as if I'd just let go of a huge burden that suppressed me. I peeked one more time at her and left the living room.

7-5

Since I left home late, I gave up riding my bike and decided to head over to the meeting place by train and bus. I flipped and scanned through the materials in the moving train carriage to get myself prepared for the meeting.

Partly thanks to Yuigahama's help, we were fortunate to be able to quickly settle on a meeting date and time. Since I felt it was quite burdensome to talk to Tamanawa, I took it as part of my job to skim through some business terminology books in order to increase our common language.

Soon, I arrived at the closest station near the meeting place and quickly hurried over to the community center where the meeting took place.

It would have been a lot easier if we could just hold the meeting at our school. However, our school usually doesn't let outsiders in, unless they went through some official procedures. But as someone who doesn't even belong to the Student Council, that'd be nearly impossible for me to arrange. On the other hand, it would seem a little too informal and casual if we held the meeting in a coffee shop. Considering the fact that we needed to upload a photo of the meeting on the SNS later, a more or less formal place would certainly be more preferable - just enough feelings of formality to make our dummy prom plan look more realistic... As I was thinking that and walking forward, my smartphone began vibrating.

I checked the notification, it was a message from Yuigahama. The text straightforwardly wrote 'Expect to take a little longer?'. Thinking that this was pretty rare for Yuigahama given that she normally types much longer messages, I simply replied 'Almost there'.

In fact, I'd already arrived at the front of the building. I looked around the entrance and its surroundings but was not able to spot Yuigahama there. It seemed that she'd already gone inside.

I climbed up the stairs at a hurried pace and then quickly headed over to the small meeting room that we reserved in advance.

A few steps away from the room that I was about to enter, I could already vaguely hear Orimoto's voice. Without even confirming the room plate, I knew this room would be the small meeting room that we reserved. I knocked on the door and then opened it.

After that, I saw Yuigahama already in there, and opposite to her sat Tamanawa and Orimoto.

"Ah-, Hikigaya-, long time no see-"

Orimoto waved her hand softly at me in a very delightful mood; whereas Tamanawa sitting next to her crossed his arms, blew air over his forehead, and peeked at me briefly.

In response, I also greeted them lightly with a nod and pulled out the chair next to Yuigahama, who then, without saying anything out loud, mouthed 'Yahallo-' to me. Indeed, it would be a little bit embarrassing to say that in front of other people, yep yep. Nevertheless, that way of secretly conveying things still felt somehow embarrassing in front of other people!

In order to cover up that embarrassment, I whispered at Yuigahama.

"Didn't we agree to meet at the entrance first?"

"Yeah… Eh, we met at the entrance first, and then, since it was too cold outside…"

Yuigahama fiddled with her hair bun as if she was a little troubled by it. She wore a bitter smile. Probably, Orimoto lightheartedly talked to her just as usual, and then following the flow, dragged Yuigahama inside. And then just like that, before I showed up, both of them probably had a not-so-close uneasy talk with each other… gross, I feel kind of sorry for her.

"Ah, I see… I feel kind of sorry…"

As I lowered my head, Yuigahama shook her head and put on a gentle smile. Maybe this exchange between us was seen by Orimoto, she deliberately clapped her hands loudly.

“Ah… Really sorry about that! Yuigahama was planning to wait outside there, but I told her to come in. It was quite cold outside, right? That’s also a preach-it...”

If you had to say that was like Orimoto, it was quite like her – frankly expressing her apology. Rather than saying that she didn’t care about a sense of distance, she would still try to approach knowing that the distance exists. She’s been like this for a while.

“I… I see…. It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

As I said that, Yuigahama also nodded her head in agreement. Orimoto also smiled.

“Right, right! I also felt it was quite cold outside. It’s really okay.”

“Alright. Then it’s fine...”

Orimoto wore a smile trying to cover it up, and at the same time, fiddled her perm back and forth.

How… how should I put this… This embarrassing atmosphere…. Just seeing Orimoto alone felt like “Crap…” but then together with Yuigahama, it’d turn into a “Damn, crap, crap…” god-punch situation... [68]

Yuigahama and Orimoto both smiled at each other lightly. I was not able to peek into what kind of expression laid deep underneath those smiles.

With that, moments of heavily bitter silence kept going on. Orimoto finally opened her mouth after spitting out a short sigh,

“Speaking of which, by the way, why didn’t Hikigaya contact us? The fact that Yuigahama was the one that contacted us really freaked me out.”

Orimoto, who stared at me while complaining, filled her voice with dissatisfaction, but what she said was quite jocular. Thanks to that, the tight atmosphere was able to loosen up a little bit. I finally was able to slowly open my heavily-sealed mouth,

“Ah, well, when I switched to a new phone at that time, eh, things like this and that happened, so…”

I couldn’t just say “I deleted your contact info” right to her face, so I just mumbled something while trying to round up the story. Orimoto interpreted it however she wanted, then followed me up with her yesses.

“Ah, the address book got changed, right. Why don’t you tell me your LINE?”

“I don’t use LINE, though.”

“That’s funny. Isn’t that an excuse used by girls?”

“No, it’s not funny. Eh, girl refusal methods are quite terrible...”

Judging from the fact that she mentioned it as girls’ excuses, perhaps it does happen quite frequently around Orimoto… ‘Is that Nakamachi-san? I feel you~ That person feels like that type~’, etc. I feel sorry for thinking about it this way… Orimoto then tilted her head in her way.

“Eh, what now then…”

Casting her eyes afar, Orimoto hit her face with her smartphone and thought hard. Meanwhile, Tamanawa who sat next to her kept blowing the hair on his forehead and sometimes coughed once or twice.

And then, just as I expected, he looked at me with a very sharp gaze. I read into the air and returned to him another cough to prevent Orimoto from furthering the conversation. I then opened my bag and started grabbing things.

“Well, let’s put that aside for now… So today, I’m here as a representative of the President of the Student Council, or rather as her deputy.”

What I took out of my bag was the main topic of our meeting today - the proposal for the dummy prom. Though we had already sent digital copies to both Tamanawa and Orimoto, I still wanted to prepare a physical copy for the meeting today. This is an iron law for being a Company Slave[69]. RIP the so-called ‘paperless’...

“Recently, we have been planning our prom, and gradually we began thinking about upscaling it. I’m not saying we’re doing it for this upcoming one, but we’re more like looking into it as an option starting as of next year…”

As I was speaking, Yuigahama glanced at me in surprise. I nodded to her in acknowledgment.

To us, this dummy prom plan itself was targeting the graduating class of this year, but that was only limited to within our Soubu HS. In fact, the website that we were preparing did not explicitly mention whether it was targeting this year or next year, but was merely titled as the “New Prom”.

From Tamanawa’s perspective, they couldn’t possibly accept holding such a ridiculously absurd prom plan this year. If we did have enough time to do it, it would probably be easier to get them aboard. There was no need to tell them the whole story.

Nevertheless, those small number of annoying parents from our school were only nagging about the prom this year. For this reason, when there’s a new prom plan that comes into the picture, obviously they are going to tag it along and start thinking about it. If they saw a prom plan that they already dislike become even more ridiculous, they would for sure stand up and try to destroy it right away.

In fact, with regard to the when-it-will-happen concern that I just mentioned, neither Orimoto nor Tamanawa seemed to care about it. They took it for granted that I was obviously referring to next year, or even later.

Orimoto grabbed the proposal booklet in hand and then made a sound as if she just lost her incentive.

“Eh, this thing…”

The front cover of the proposal that Orimoto was flipping then had rather meaningless characters and words printed in exaggerated fonts. With that Tamanawa could definitely…! He would definitely get it all! While thinking that, we quickly turned our eyes to Tamanawa, bearing a sense of hope in mind.

Thereupon, Tamanawa carefully read the proposal page by page, and sometimes, as if finding something that concerned him, he would stop flipping and wear a difficult expression. And then, he just deeply sighed.

Eventually, he seemed to finish reading it, and carefully closed the booklet. He raised his face and poured his stare into me.

"... so, I have carefully read the proposal."

While saying that, Tamanawa kept tapping the table with his finger in a slow tempo. He then blew up some air across his forehead.

"It's good that there's a lot of diversity in it. However, other than that, everything else is simply too abstract. There are so many needless things in it that the intention of the proposal simply digresses from its focus."

After hearing his words, I was so shocked that I had my mouth wide open, and froze in amazement.

"What… did you... say…"

He did not use any of those attractive foreign terminologies at all…? While I was still in surprise, Tamanawa continued his words,

"I think it's better to focus on words that have better expressive power. You want to make the proposal look realizable. Of course, I can understand the fact that you want to incorporate a sense of 'upcoming expectation' for an experimental event. But unfortunately, I don't see any possible ways to eventually lead into it."

He waved and moved his hands about widely as if he were practicing Tai chi. Tamanawa presented his reasoning word by word, and in the end, he pushed his forehead hair upward.

"It is for this reason that your proposal doesn't work."

Tamanawa's eyes looked as if they were implying "You have not yet reached that stage yet," in sympathy.[70]

Why did it turn out like this? As I was thinking, Yuigahama looked at me with a 'is he really this kind of person?' confused face. I shook my head

gently in response, implying ‘I don’t know and don’t care, after all’.

Following my confusion, I cast my reserved eyes to Orimoto, who wore a bitter smile and scratched her cheek. Judging from her reaction, it seemed that Tamanawa-san has been like this recently.

It’s been a while since those who were regarded as ‘holding high consciousness’ had been made fun of.[71] It looked like Tamanawa-san had been reading into these kinds of atmospheres from his surroundings recently, and perhaps started to consider changing his own image. In some sense, he had grown up and become more mature in a way. People always say “One who has been away for three days must be looked at with new eyes…” This saying describes him precisely… If I keep following his pace like this, I’d definitely get GAAAAAHHHH! wrecked by him, while screaming hysterically.

Wait, now’s not the time to be impressed by him. If Tamanawa refuses to hop on board, then my plan would be all over.

What should I do now? As I panicked, I unconsciously started to shake my knees. Tamanawa kept tapping the table with his finger as if he was waiting for my response. Yuigahama looked at me and then Tamanawa anxiously, and then sighed gently. Seeing this, Orimoto couldn’t hold her laugh but let it slip away.

All these noises crossed over and became a disturbing cacophony. Its rhythm and beat further accelerated my feelings of anxiety. In any way, I had to open my mouth because I felt compelled to say something at that moment.

It’s truly ‘freestyle’ just to spit out words one after another as they jump into my mind. Words with high consciousness sounded abnormally harmonious with Japanese raps.[72]

“Your worry is the budgeto? But we’re used to having insufficient budgeto. So now we need to use the gadgeto! Think about the scale, and adjusto! All I want to do is suggesto!”

I did not think much about either the verse nor the flow but just spouted out words at will. Tamanawa nodded his head rhythmically and took it all in. And then, he waved his hands in circles and soon replied.

“Your argument is only temporal. The content of your proposal is only trivial. In case we need to work together, if it’s not concrete, we’d all get fucked over. Can you not see the direction? If you can’t answer this, then the proposal goes boom, disappears. So all we need to do is to think together!”

Tamanawa rapped and explained it all at ease, making me rather speechless. Despite that, I still responded,

“We also just finished our draft. We simply need a native billboard. Though the direction is clearless, the concept only from Lincoln it comes, we then need to use our own hands to build the nests. But, if there’s nobody leading, we then remain unmoving. On the budget we can crowdfunding, as long as it comes to people’s sight, it’s relaxing.[73]

While I wiped off the sweat from my forehead, Tamanawa raised his eyebrows, and listened to me light-heartedly, in a relaxed way. Confirming that it had been one beat after I finished my rap, he flipped through the proposal booklet and tapped the part where it was fully loaded by my counter-Tamanawa high-consciousness measures.

“Indeed there are some interests. But what I care about are the excuses. Only a small part of the proposal is of importance. The other content is just nonsense. If we do it together, then we work as a phalanx. But now, we are simply inharmonious!”

I believed he just waved his hands around a lot faster than before, and towards the end, he pointed his finger as if he was firing a bullet at me.

Though we joked around with each other, Tamanawa’s gaze penetrated deeply and rendered me speechless. Indeed, just as Tamanawa said, this proposal took Tamanawa too lightly. I took it for granted that Tamanawa would hop on board if I simply wrote down a bunch of business terminology without putting much thought into it.

Nevertheless, human beings do change a lot. After all, Tamanawa was taught a lesson by Yukinoshita during the Christmas event. He should have learned to change since then.

“Eh, well, that is…”

I gave up talking. Whatever. I didn't have any words left. This guy was just as strong as I expected. I was out of ideas. So strong… After I sighed deeply to acknowledge my defeat, Tamanawa put on a smile full of pride from winning our bout.

"That's why your proposal doesn't work."

After being told straight to my face again so blatantly, I lost my words again. The game had eight sections and two turns. Before even reaching the third round, I already surrendered after taking a critical hit.

"Eh… What now then…"

As I downcastly dropped my head, Yuigahama, who had been observing our flow of exchanges until then, finally couldn't bear it anymore and opened her mouth carefully, half-troubled and half-astounded. Orimoto instead had been looking at our exchange and holding her giggles back. She quickly wiped off the laughing tears that appeared in her eyes and let a deep breath out. And then she took the proposal book in her hand.

"But this proposal still looks quite fun, doesn't it?"

"Ah, I know right!"

As soon as Orimoto said that to Yuigahama, Yuigahama's face quickly sparkled. Orimoto didn't put in much thought into her words but rather seemed to merely express her honest interest in the proposal. Hearing her words, Tamanawa immediately wore a gentlemanly smile on his face. Along with that, he also snapped his fingers and winked.

"That's true. That's also a *preach it*!"

"Wut….."

Just a moment ago, he was arguing vehemently against me. But after seeing his reversal of attitude I couldn't help but show my surprised reaction and stared at Tamanawa. Maybe he finally felt embarrassed by it, as Tamanawa coughed several times gently, then turned his attention back to the proposal booklet.

“Of course, it’s not like we oppose this proposal or anything. However, if we do not stay on the same wavelength from the very beginning, we will soon run into conflicts and end up going into different directions. So, I think we should first solidify that part first.”

While speaking, he quickly turned his eyes at me. I nodded my head gently in response.

“Think of this proposal as our tentative plan. We just wanted it to look flashy. We’re sorry if it turns out to be difficult to understand. Therefore, shall we first set the practicality aside, go back to the starting line, and discuss from there?”

Laying my hands on my knees, I lowered my head a little bit. Yuigahama also followed me.

“Please…”

Tamanawa looked at us attentively, while Orimoto blinked her eyes. A strange moment of silence fell and made me feel rather itchy, so I uneasily moved my body. Orimoto sighed mildly with her light smiles.

“... sounds good to me. Let’s do it, President!”

Orimoto then hit Tamanawa’s arm with her elbow a couple of times. Every time Tamanawa got hit by her, he made an indescribable ‘nfu, nnnn’ sound. Yep, I knew that feeling. Back in middle school, with that skin-contact, I almost died on the spot… Tamanawa kept still for a while and finally seemed to calm down. He gently rubbed the place where he got hit and went back to talking again.

“... Alright. Luckily we still have time. There’s enough time for us to discuss it more. Bearing in mind that we want to realize this plan, we need to carefully work on the unification of the understanding of our goal.”

“Preach it!”

Orimoto immediately made a thumbs-up. Perhaps Tamanawa was quite delighted by it. He quickly smiled, rubbed his chin, and leaned forward with his hands crossed.

“Speaking of the goal, there’s this story from the past. Once upon a time, there were three bricklayers in a town… If you asked one of them, what’s your ultimate goal? How do you think he would respond?”

Tamanawa snapped his fingers loudly and then pointed at me. It looked like he was fired up. Bringing up some business training story that he heard from somewhere, he even intentionally wanted me to answer it. But, sadly, when I worked on the proposal, I actually learned about stories like this.

“Building a marvelous grand church that keeps standing generation after generation.”

Feeling sorry for my immediate response, I quickly gave the correct answer. Tamanawa nodded to me proudly.

“That’s correct. He says that while stacking the bricks. And then you turn to another bricklayer and ask him. What do you think he would say?”

This time, Tamanawa snapped his fingers using both hands and then pointed at me. After hearing his words, Yuigahama looked rather confused. I shook my head to tell her not to worry about it. You lose if you get serious.

Knowing that my words won’t simply be delivered to Tamanawa’s ears, I gave the very same answer again.

“...building a marvelous grand church that keeps standing generation after generation.”

“Right. He says it while keeping his hands busy on his job… and then the third person...”

Tamanawa looked around at the three of us, then took a long enough break, and finally opened his mouth solemnly.

“... ‘building a marvelous grand church that keeps standing generation after generation.’ says the third bricklayer.”

“Oh, oh…”

Looking at Tamanawa's twinkling eyes, I had nothing left to say but only expressed surprise. I wasn't sure how Tamanawa interpreted my surprise, but he let a long breath out in satisfaction.

"We need to very carefully ponder what our ultimate goal is."

He stood up heavily and then turned his body halfway facing us.

"Do you know how we can defeat Disneyland?"

Without waiting for my response, Tamanawa began walking around in the room while his shoes were making loud noises.

"If we take the normal approach, we will never defeat Disneyland because Disneyland has nearly reached complete perfection. So, we need to think from another angle - create something that's incomplete, where the sense of entertainment actually lies."

Eventually, after making two circles in the meeting room, Tamanawa headed towards the whiteboard. He started drawing some mysterious diagram on it.

"An exam where you always score 90/100, versus an exam where you used to score 0 but this time score 50 on it. Which exam gives you more happiness? What we need to consider is not how we can gather 10,000 people, but rather how we can celebrate with 10,000 people."

Tamanawa knocked the whiteboard loudly. Perhaps being overwhelmed by his vigor, Yuigahama clapped her hands in admiration.

"Ohhh~ I got it!... maybe... in a way…"

I cast my doubtful stare at Yuigahama. She then averted her eyes from me and spoke in broken words. Meanwhile, Orimoto was playing with her smartphone and nodded her head in agreement.

"I know, right! Preach it!"

Hey, you were barely listening… Despite that, what Tamanawa just said indeed wasn't completely wrong. The arguments themselves weren't exactly unreasonable, if you have to say 'preach it' then it's quite a valid

‘preach it’… By the way, I strongly sensed this feeling of ‘You’re the last person who should be saying that’... Maybe these high conscious people will eventually all end up joining the IT industry. It felt like the CEO of some IT company just rolled a gatcha and got a 1-star card.

Even after this guy stopped using those annoying big foreign words, the essence of his argument did not change one bit.

This was something that we heard all the time around Inage Kaigan. Perhaps the fact that we considered its lack of freshness is indeed the proof of our growth.[74]

As I was thinking about this trivia, Tamanawa, who just a moment ago was talking nonsense, started mumbling while staring at the whiteboard.

“... Looking into next year and beyond, we need to begin our preparations right away. We have to stack our results one by one starting as of now…”

After that, he turned his face to us, with a slightly bitter smile on his face.

Maybe Tamanawa himself had already noticed the emptiness of his own words. Therefore, he had still been borrowing words from others. Yet despite that, he still kept praying. Once his actions are followed by the results, all the words he said must then become Tamanawa’s own words. I look forward to his future!

Despite the enmity between us before, I still cherished the fact that only this time I was able to team up with Tamanawa. Not only for reasons like the dummy plan, but also for having a strong helping mate that can support Iroha’s prom next year and beyond. Worthy of Representative Kaihin Sougou! As a ‘homie’ hyped with ‘hood’, I can almost call you ‘my man’! I need to take a ‘my man’ photo with you![75]

“... can we take a photo of this meeting? Also, if possible, I’d like to have it displayed on the website.”

“Of course, go ahead. Ah, in that case, maybe I should write it in a more easily understandable way…”

Tamanawa consented happily. And then, he fixed a couple of places on the whiteboard, then began talking about stuff and circling his hands as if he was operating a potter's wheel.

Barely before we ran out of the meeting room's reserved time, Tamanawa's speech finally finished up. When we left the community center, the sun was already at the zenith, and the busy streets were decorated by their liveliness.

Before joining the crowd in front of the station, Orimoto turned her body around facing us.

"What should we do now? Go home, or lunch?"

"We have some errands to run at our school later…"

"I see- then let's leave the meal for next time!"

After Yuigahama said it in an apologetic tone, Orimoto frowned a little bit. Yuigahama then joined her hands together and lowered her head in apology. I also bobbed my head. Thereupon, Tamanawa next to me gave a cough to clear his throat, quickly took a step forward and stood next to Orimoto.

"So we shall dismiss ourselves here. By the way, now that both Orimoto and I have some spare time after this, why don't we…"

Blushing slightly, Tamanawa peeked to his side to probe her reaction and mumbled. His tone was quite strong in the beginning but as he went on, it became softer and softer. I was not sure if Orimoto was paying attention or not. She simply nodded as if nothing happened.

"Right, go home."

"Oh, okay…"

Tamanawa only responded with that, his mouth twitching. But soon he pulled himself together, slowly walking straight towards me while blowing air towards his forehead.

“... when you decide the next meeting time, could you give me a reminder?”

To be honest, we had no such plan, but out of pressure, I had to nod my head in response.

I don’t quite get the situation but… Ganbare! Tamanawa-san!

7-6

The school campus during the weekend was extraordinarily quiet - all sounds seemed to reflect and bounce back into a void.

Starting from the playground, outside the campus, noises could be heard all over the place. Whereas once we entered the campus, I started to feel a cold sense of rejection.

Nevertheless, inside the Game Club room, the atmosphere was all fired up and felt like a casino.

"... yay! Finally got it done!"

"Just in case, let's do a test run and bring the website up."

Hatana pressed the enter key and then suddenly laid down on the table. Sagami, the little brother, powerlessly pushed the laptop to me.

I looked at the laptop screen to check the progress. An official website that almost exactly matched the original specification showed up on the screen. The main subject, our stylish photograph, was also displayed along with some other text information. The only thing left was to add our social network accounts to it. It almost seemed ready as the teaser website. I was quite impressed by their ability to produce something like this just in a few days.

"Zaimokuza, can you try to publish something?"

"Okie… one sec!"

As I said that, Zaimokuza soon published quite a happy article full of hashtags. After refreshing the page, in the SNS main body an article titled "We exchanged our opinions with Kaihin-Sougou HS on the prom! From now on we would like to bring more schools in!" showed up immediately, along with a photo that we took in which Tamanawa circled his hands as if he was operating a potter's wheel.

"Woah, looks amazing! Great!"

Behind me, Yuigahama peeked at the screen and excitedly hit my shoulders. Being slightly bothered by the close distance, while giving the laptop back to Sagami I also quietly escaped from Yuigahama's hands.

"Okay, now let's migrate it to the production environment. Zaimokuza, please take the job of updating the SNS for the next few days."

"Acknowledged."

"You can count on me!"

Both Sagami and Zaimokuza nodded in response. Except for one person - Hatana wore a difficult expression in front of the monitor.

"Is it really okay for it to look like this…"

"Yep, in terms of the content, it's more than enough already."

We not only presented the accomplishment of our discussion with Tamanawa but also hinted that we might tag more schools along. That should already make us look like we can no longer be left unattended and uninterrupted. Given that our discussion with Kaihin-Sougou was described as being on hold at the stage of 'exchanging ideas and opinions', we would have strong excuses to give if the dummy prom plan was abandoned. We would then naturally make those who complained about the prom look like overreacting idiots.

Just as I was about to explain, Hatano tilted his head and squinted his eyes at me.

"... uh, I feel like for being the source of information, the website might be a little too weak…"

"Well, that's true... But it would serve its purpose even if a small fraction of our parents see it. In fact, it would be quite troublesome if an unnecessarily large number of people learn about it. I think the level of influence it has right now is precisely what we need. Furthermore, just in case, I will leak this to the parents, so we should expect some reactions from them soon."

Leaking the information was the most annoying part though… Thinking about the errand that I needed to run next, I accidentally ended up wearing a bitter face. I couldn't help but naturally break out in a sigh. Yuigahama looked at me in wonder. I continued my words in order to cover it up.

"Sorry guys, just for the next two days, pay attention to the website and see if the website has any bugs or glitches."

Hatano nodded his head gently and turned back to his laptop. He then started talking to Sagami about their next steps.

I looked around at everyone again and sighed quietly.

By this time, we're almost finished dealing with the hardware part. It was a rushed product that might contain obvious flaws and signs of rough work. We nevertheless have all tried our best. Actually, they all tried their best for my sake. Thanks to them, as long as I manage to get through this weekend, what's next should be more or less chill. I had to express my genuine gratefulness to Zaimokuza and the two Game Club members.

"If things go well, we might be able to see results as early as the beginning of next week… All in all, thank you all so much! Much appreciated for all your help!"

How deplorable I was - only being able to say it in a low voice. Even so, I spread my thighs apart, rested my hands on them and slowly lowered my head in gratitude.

Thereupon, Zaimokuza and the two Game Club dudes looked at me as if seeing an endangered species. Only Yuigahama showed a satisfied smile on her face. Feeling rather uneasy to be stared at, I cleared my throat.

"Well, let's put our thanks aside. I'm sorry to bring you all here on a weekend day. Please wrap things up if you wish… In all, thanks for all your work!"

As soon as I finished my words, I took my belongings and quickly stood up from my seat. It would be mindless for the employees to leave if the

manager still stays, after all! How considerate and mindful I am! All managers should learn from me.

“Ah, wait.. wait for me…! Th...thanks everyone! Let’s have a celebration some time!”

Following me, Yuigahama stood up from her seat as well. After that, I turned to Zaimokuza and others and raised my arm high to cheer them up. In response, Hatano and Sagami returned ambiguous, complicated smiles to me.

“No, that…”

“Well, I will give it some thought…”

“Alright, for now, let’s say we will go if we can.”

Only one person, Zaimokuza, responded cheerfully. Normally that’s something you would say if you want to find an excuse *not* to go, but in the case of Zaimokuza, he totally would just simply go... Strange right?

After having their work done, the three of them were filled with a sense of liberation and accomplishment. I peeked at them from the side as they began chitchatting. Then both Yuigahama and I quietly left the clubroom.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean my work was done. I took my smartphone from my pocket, tapping the screen as I walked. Yuigahama beside me was also on her phone, and she looked at me.

“Hikki- You have plans next? Or just going home?”

“Well, I have a phone call next… And depending on its outcome…”

As I said that, I kept holding my smartphone in hand yet to make the call. I looked at the contact book displayed on the screen and sighed deeply.

Originally I was planning to call earlier, and I should have done so.

However, it’s quite normal to put off calls and messages that you are unwilling to make or compose, such as progress reports or notification of

delays. For those calls that involve apologies, you would always end up delaying them if possible, typical hopeless procrastination psychology. In the end, when you're barely at the deadline, you end up causing more damage. You knew that but still couldn't help but procrastinate anyway...

But this time, no matter how much I hated doing it, as long as I had no other choice I had to resort to this way.

Suspicious of me, who kept frowning and staring at my smartphone, Yuigahama moved her eyes back and forth between her smartphone and me.

"Calling… who?"

"Eh… the helper that will do the leak for me."

After we reached the overpass connecting the special purpose building and the main building, I finally made up my mind. Knowing that Yuigahama had been looking at me in concern, I decided that it was time to act.

Breathing out a long sigh, I turned my face to Yuigahama.

"... excuse me, I need to make a quick phone call."

"Of course."

I said my words with the implication that she should leave first, but Yuigahama just stood there still, waiting for me to begin my call. Given that she already acted that way, it would have been tough for me to explicitly ask her to leave...

It can't be helped. I pointed at the bench in the middle of the overpass, telling her with my eye contact to sit down and wait for me there. I then pressed the call button with my hand holding the smartphone.

After two or three beeping tones, the other end picked it up immediately.

"Hyahhallo-! How are you?"

"...I'm doing well."

The person I was calling, whose name is Yukinoshita Haruno, acted delightfully as if the conversation the other day never happened. After hearing her voice, I clearly felt my cheek twitch briefly. Because of that, my voice might get a little too high. I could hear joyful giggling from the speaker.

I wiped off the unpleasant feeling of being seen through and quickly resumed my business.

“I need to have a small conversation with you. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Warmly welcome!”

“Sorry for my sudden notice, but is tonight a good time…”

As I said that, I heard the other end make a sigh as if she had to briefly think about it.

“Hmm…… It really is quite ‘sudden’. Well, alright. In that case, can you come over here? There’s a coffee shop right by the entrance of the outlet.”

“Ah, that outlet close to your place?”

I was still more or less bothered by the fact that soon after she showed a troubling tone, she immediately said yes. While trying to think of the place that she designated, I vaguely replied to her.

Meanwhile, Yuigahama, who was supposed to be sitting down, suddenly stood up, leaned towards me, and stealthily placed her ear next to my phone. Being approached so suddenly and unexpectedly, I almost freaked out on the spot, with my heart speeding up immediately. Unfortunately, I was unable to shake her off, so I took several steps forward to distance myself from her. Yuigahama then showed dissatisfaction on her face, trying to approach me again.

Feeling suspicious of what was going on here - the silent attack and defense between Yuigahama and me, Haruno-san asked me from the other end.

“What happened?”

“No, nothing.”

I responded quickly. Covering the microphone with my hand, I reproved Yuigahama in a low voice.

“... what do you think you are doing? I’m on my phone right now.”

“Are you meeting Haruno-san?”

As I was about to go back to the call, Yuigahama interrupted me. Her voice was sharper than usual. Her face seemed a little bit worried. After seeing that face, I was unable to evade her question or make a joke. I had no choice but to give a quick answer.

“... eh, with regard to the website, I think that person would be able to leak the information for us.”

“That’s bad... what if I also come with you?”

Yuigahama said it with a voice sharper than usual. Her face seemed rather serious and worrisome.

“Why do you…”

Even if I asked, she wouldn’t open her mouth. No reply. Her eyes were telling me firmly that even if I said no to her, she would still tag along with me anyway.

To be honest, I really didn’t want her to come with me. Every time I meet Yukinoshita Haruno nothing good turns out in the end. I would really feel terrible if, in addition, Yuigahama gets involved. As I thought in hesitation, ‘Hello? Hello?’ with a rather irritated tone came from the speaker. Panicked and hurried, I quickly held the phone back up to my ear.

“Ah, I’m really sorry… Yuigahama and I will come together, then.”

“Gahama-san? Oh, sure thing!”

Without taking a moment to think about it, Haruno-san responded light-heartedly. After we decided on the time and place to meet, the other end abruptly hung up.

I loosely and powerlessly put down the phone and glanced at Yuigahama, who was holding the straps of her backpack firmly and biting her lip.

“Let’s go…”

After I briefly spoke, Yuigahama nodded her head with a gentle smile on her face. However, the footsteps that followed no longer sounded energized as usual, but rather quiet and lonely.

Slowly, quietly, without letting anyone notice.

That sound was perhaps very close to the sound that implies the ending is near.

7-7

The sun set over the horizon of the sea. Only the afterglow was left spreading over the western sky. Lit from the lingering evening glow, the streets were also brightened by street and building lights. The pedestrians' shadows stretched in various directions.

Although the designated coffee shop was quite packed already, thanks to the European stylish decorations and the quietly playing BGM, the ambiance there was pretty relaxing and comforting.

I told the staff that I was meeting someone inside, and was taken to an open terrace. The chilling wind of early spring was blowing over my skin. After night fell, the temperature went down a bit, so there appeared to be only a few customers here and there.

Nevertheless, deep in the corner, around Yukinoshita Haruno was an empty area where no one was sitting.

Haruno-san wore a dark red coat on her shoulders, along with a long skirt and short boots on her feet. Over her knees, she was gently covered by a blanket that probably came from the shop. She was quietly reading a book under the parasol heater. She occasionally held the mug to warm up her hands, then took a sip from it.

I was amazed by her appearance, stopped my feet there and squinted my eyes. The aura around her overlapped with a scene from some time ago that I hadn't seen for a long time.

However, I was only dazzled by it for a brief moment before she noticed us. She smiled gently and waved her hands at us.

I lowered my head a little bit in courtesy. As she kept beckoning to us, both Yuigahama and I sat down opposite to her.

"Want to drink anything? The bread here is also very delicious."

I wanted to get it done as soon as possible, so I was gonna say the same thing… But then I decided no. The mug that Haruno-san was holding

seemed to have mulled wine in it. When the reddish purple liquid in it was shaken, it released a strong smell of cinnamon.

“I’ll go with regular coffee.”

“I’ll… I’ll have the black tea.”

We promptly finished our orders and waited for the drinks to be brought over. Meanwhile, Haruno-san placed a bookmark inside the book that she’d just stopped reading, putting the book back in her handbag.

“So, what’s this conversation about?”

With her body leaning slightly forward, Haruno-san rested her cheek and stared at my face. Those eyes reminded me of the bad experience I had the other day. Her sexy lips were accompanied by her smile. Her big eyes squinted like an arrow while looking at me. She crossed her long legs on top of each other under the table, with the tip of her foot gently touching my knee.

The words that I was about to say turned out to be only sighs. I felt like my throat was tangled and for some reason thirsty.

To be honest, I really do not want to talk to this person. It’s not like I personally hate her, since I’m not good at dealing with females in general. If I had to think, factor by factor, then it’s not like I’m holding a grudge against her either. From the perspective of her appearance or her personality, I can’t say that there are only a few parts that I like about her.

But still, I was scared of her - like looking into a mirror at night, looking through the opening of a door in a dark room, the uneasy feeling from behind while taking a shower, such and such… It’s that kind of fear that you don’t even dare to figure out or confirm what it actually is.

Whatever I put into words, from that end, everything becomes tied up together. I feel like I’m being aimed at by something that I don’t even want to learn about - I was dominated by this kind of fear and anxiety.

“Eh, it was something… about the prom.”

While I was at a loss for words, Yuigahama, who couldn't bear seeing me like that, opened her mouth.

"I was thinking about what it was… is that the matter…?"

The delightful face that Haruno-san had been wearing until then soon disappeared as if it was all just a joke. Apparently having lost all her interest, Haruno-san leaned her body back onto the chair.

"When you said you wanted to have a conversation, I thought normally it would be a love-talk, right?"

Saying her words half-jokingly, she widely shrugged her shoulders. Seeing that Haruno-san lost interest, I made a shallow sigh.

"When I said it's a conversation, normally it should imply asking you for a favor, right?"

I took a small sip of the coffee that was just delivered to me and made a light-hearted comment. In response, Haruno-san broke into her smile.

"What a business-life you are living!"

"Well, I do hate work, though."

I muttered sarcastically with half of my face twisted upward. Soon I could feel that the atmosphere was relaxing. Yuigahama, sitting next to me, also sighed in relief. How miserable I was! It was good to have Yuigahama tag along with me after all. Had I come here alone, I would have totally gotten caught into her pace from beginning to end. Even if I managed to dodge on the surface, deep inside, my heart would be completely captured anyway.

I nodded to Yuigahama to tell her that I was already fine. Although I wasn't able to easily dispel my sense of fear towards Haruno-san, I did not want to show any more weak or clumsy sides of me.

After taking another sip of coffee, I took out my smartphone.

"I want you to properly leak this piece of information."

I showed her the official website for the dummy prom that we'd just finished.

Haruno-san looked at the website for a few seconds and soon made a small sigh.

"Hmm… I'm not sure about this…"

"Eh… our prom faced very strong opposition, so we wanted to consider something new."

As soon as Yuigahama tried to explain it further, Haruno-san made a gentle, kind smile on her face and interrupted Yuigahama.

"Kay, I understood that part already, so it's okay."

It seemed that Haruno-san already understood the outline of what was going on after skimming through the text on the website. Thanks to that, we were able to proceed quickly.

Just as I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that I didn't have to explain things in detail, I held my breath.

Yukinoshita Haruno stared at me with her cold eyes. I noticed that and quickly lost my words.

"What I do not understand is why are you resorting to this method… Didn't I tell you earlier about the relationship between you three?"

Although her smiling voice had her teasing, I could also hear the sadness that almost conveyed a sense of hopeless with it. As if tortured by its incorrectness, as if grieved over the mistakes, every single word that she said hurt me as if it were pouring ice water over my neurons, freezing me immediately.

"You really think that this is also for the sake of that kid?"

"... this really has nothing much to do with Yukinoshita. It's not like I was asked by her to do it. Rather, I chose to act on my own. So it was really just serving my self-satisfaction."

I let out the words that I'd carefully prepared beforehand.

I understood very well that as long as I decided to ask Yukinoshita Haruno to do the leaking, I could no longer dodge this question from her. Therefore, I straightforwardly chose to say it in the least mistaken way. Despite the fact that there was no absolutely correct answer, I still firmly believed that what I said was, at least, not the wrong thing. At the very least, it was one of the truths that I myself believed.

Unfortunately, I didn't think my excuse could possibly work on Yukinoshita Haruno. That was precisely why I wanted to avoid this person if at all possible.

Haruno-san broke out in a smile and took a quick sip of the hot wine. While scrubbing the edge of the glass, she began talking to me slowly as if trying to correct my reasoning.

"Yukino-chan did not ask for your help, yet you decided to act voluntarily on your own… Hence, as I said, isn't that co-dependence? Precisely just as the word suggests, right? In the end, there's no difference at all."

I was unable to deny her statement right away, losing my voice. Yuigahama cast her mindful eyes to me first, and then to Haruno-san.

Not just Isshiki and Hayama but I'm afraid Yuigahama as well all had something in their minds without explicitly saying them. Even I myself have realized that I simply treated it as a word-game, evading an excuse.

"Yukino-chan chose independence, wanting to end that relationship. What Hikigaya-kun can do is to watch over her in that way, isn't it?"

Using her voice that could not be gentler or kinder, Haruno-san said it as if she was teaching an infant.

I could no longer look straight into her eyes, so I lowered my eyes. What she said was definitely correct - I ended up having a tangible feeling like that. I noticed that I was already holding the sleeves of my coat firmly in hand at that moment.

"… I still do not think you are correct."

Yuigahama muttered. Though her voice was so low that it could have immediately left with the wind, it clearly entered my ear unambiguously. I was not able to identify her facial expression since she had suppressed her emotion in her voice. I looked at Yuigahama's face.

Her eyes were looking at neither me nor Haruno-san. Yuigahama straightened her back and stared firmly at one single spot on the table.

Haruno-san's eyes, which had been focused on only me until then, finally turned quickly in Yuigahama's direction. And she leaned her head slightly and urged Yuigahama to keep talking. Acknowledging her eye contact, Yuigahama began talking falteringly,

"It sounded good when you said 'watch over her', but ultimately what happens is that we grow distant from each other. Avoiding each other and maintaining distance from each other. If we simply let that happen, we won't change a bit in the end. In that case, perhaps, it would all end up in tragedy - not only for us but also the prom…"

Lit by the retro-fashioned light in the coffee shop, her profile looked a lot more adult-like than usual, leaving a transient shadow. Looking at that beautiful ambiance and her peaceful face, my heart grew painful inside. Or perhaps it was because the ending scene that she just mentioned was so easily imaginable for me.

"So, we want to stay close even for just a little bit longer. We have to be involved. *It* was something necessary in order to end *it* properly. So, so…"

Sentences that were created non-stop, word by word, turned into a long sigh in the end. There was no way for me to know what Yuigahama wanted to say next. I also could not read her facial expression when she cast her eyes downward.

Despite that, there is something that I do understand. Actually, it was something that I understood a long time ago.

"That's true… we need to end it properly…"

I wasn't saying it to anyone per se, but I mumbled as if I was talking to myself. Yuigahama quietly nodded her head to me.

Perhaps we all had been holding the same wish that we wanted to end *it* properly. After confirming that, I was finally able to lift my face up.

As soon as our eyes met, Haruno-san made a gentle smile, leaned her head slightly and squinted her eyes.

“Does that mean any kind of ending is okay? Even an ending that is unwanted by Yukino-chan or anyone else?”

“Yes, that’s okay.”

Without the slightest bit of hesitation, I let out my words. Looking at my face, Haruno-san quietly swallowed her breath in surprise. And then, killing the smile that she was wearing, she asked me in a voice that was much colder than before,

“… just curious, why does Hikigaya-kun have to go this far?”

To her question, I was unable to give an immediate answer. It wasn’t like I was still hesitating or wavering at that time, but rather the answer was already there. It was only because I had already been asked similar questions before that had trouble picking my words. Yuigahama stiffened her body and carefully listened to me.

Therefore, I tried my best not to lie, not to conflict with any statements that I had made, and chose to give an answer that had consistency in mind,

“Perhaps it was just … the spirit of volunteering. A heart that desires for us to help each other. Do we need any reason to help others?”

Forcing out my words shamelessly, the chair next to me began shaking. I could tell that Yuigahama’s shoulders just lost their strength. Haruno-san sighed shortly and turned her face up to the sky.

“You are quite an interesting person.”

“If you had to say that, then at least I want you to laugh at the same time.”

I wasn't sure whether Haruno-san had noticed it or not, but her face had no signs of a smile at all. Only her voice resonated. After I pointed it out, Haruno-san finally broke out her smile as if she'd just realized it.

"Telling only lies… Not saying a single word of truth."

"Whether it's real or fake, I really don't have anything in particular to say. Even if I do…"

I swallowed back what I wanted to say, I changed my words to something else.

"…you are not the person who I would tell."

"…… that's true…"

Haruno-san squinted her eyes as if she suddenly saw something very dazzling in a flash. Without changing the smile on her face, she responded to me half-jokingly. Nevertheless, her voice was somehow accompanied by a very chilling tone, followed by a dry and small sigh afterward. Perhaps she knew already. Her hand reached out to the mug. She drank the already-cold beverage inside and wiped her lips with her fingertips. Nodding her head as if she just got ready to talk again, she raised her face and put on a gentle smile.

"I will do you that favor and help you leak the website with my best efforts."

"Thank you."

Both Yuigahama and I lowered our heads. Haruno-san then rested her cheek on one hand and started tapping her smartphone screen with the other.

"However, isn't it still tough with just this little bit of help?"

After being unexpectedly told so, I became a little bit confused. Seeing my reaction, Haruno-san smiled naughtily,

"Although you have already gathered all the necessary elements, the people you are dealing with can't really be argued with using proper

reasoning, right? Furthermore, your real opponent is my mother…”

“Eh… that’s true…”

Thinking about the Yukinoshita sisters’ mother made both Yuigahama and I look at each other and smile bitterly.

Just as I expected, if a certain number of parents want to express their complaints about the dummy prom, they would do so via that mother that served as their representative. Then naturally I would become the person bearing the responsibility from the students’ side.

When thinking of the confrontation that happened the other day, to be honest, I didn’t believe I could possibly win the argument by either appealing logically or lyrically.[76]

While I frowned and mumbled my words out, Haruno-san stretched and yawned uninterestedly. She then continued her words as if they were just a byproduct of her yawn,

“But as long as you bring up the conversation with her, I think there should be a way around it, right…? I don’t think that person really cares about proms and stuff in the end.”

I was not able to grasp the intention or the connotation of her words, so I leaned my head in question. However, Haruno-san had no intention of elaborating further. Rather, she began looking at the drinking menu and humming through her nose.

“... well, I will try my best.”

“Yep, please do.”

I accepted her carelessly phrased words of encouragement which she said without even looking at me. I then ran out of words to say.

Considering the time, I thought it was just about the right time to go. I told Yuigahama that it was about time to leave using only eye contact. She nodded in reply.

“... It’s about time for us to leave now. I’m sorry for taking your time!”

“Thank you very much for your time!”

“No problem. Seeya.”

When we both stood up from our chairs, Haruno-san waved her hand gently at us. Given that she’d already pulled out the drinking menu, it seemed that she still intended to stay there longer.

After nodding to her in courtesy, we both left the coffee shop.

The distance from the coffee shop to the station was quite short. On a weekday, it would have been rush hour then. But on a Saturday like today, especially since there weren’t any prominent events happening now, it wasn’t crowded at all.

We finally reached the station plaza that also served as a small bus terminal. I looked at Yuigahama, asking her what to do next.

Ever since we left the coffee shop, Yuigahama had been silent along the way, as if she had been thinking of something. As I was concerned about that, I quickly peeked at her face. Yuigahama then wore an exhausted smile on her face.

She soon suddenly stopped walking and opened her mouth with difficulty,

“...just now, what was the ‘co-dependence’ that Haruno-san talked about?”

Despite the troubled smile that she put on, her voice was rather serious. Unable to dodge her question, I sat down on a bench nearby and tried to think of words to say. Yuigahama also sat next to me, holding her backpack to her chest.

“It’s kind of hard to explain… … you do somehow understand the ‘dependence’ part, right?”

To my question, Yuigahama nodded her head and tried to bury her face into the backpack she was hugging. I responded with a light smile and continued my words. I tried to explain it plainly, without using

complicated terminologies and omitting the nitty-gritty details if possible.

“To put simply, co-dependence means that the person who *is being relied on* is fine with his/her role of being depended on, maybe. Knowing that he/she is deemed needed, the person who is depended on finds his/her value and gains satisfaction and peace of mind out of it… In the end, both the dependent and the dependee become unwilling to get out of their situation.”

As I explained, I noticed that my voice suddenly dropped. The more I thought about it, the more I noticed myself fitting exactly into that definition. Gradually, I started feeling bitterness in my mouth.

Perhaps Yuigahama was also remembering something. She bit her lips slightly,

“That, isn’t something good, right…”

“...well, it isn’t exactly wholesome, I guess…”

--- therefore, that is, perhaps, as wrong as I expected.

After hearing my words, Yuigahama’s face turned gloomy. Seeing it made me feel really painful, so I quickly stood up from the bench as if trying to tear myself away from it.

“What that person said isn’t completely true, in fact. It’s merely one way to look at it.”

Thus, there’s no need to be concerned about her words - I tried to convey this layer of meaning to her. I then smiled at her awkwardly.

In response, Yuigahama also made a gentle smile that somehow felt sad and sorrowful. She nodded and stood up as well.

Without knowing who had first begun walking, both of us eventually arrived at the station turnstiles. Yuigahama gently raised her hand and waved at me,

“So, I have to take the train now.”

“Alright then, take care!”

“Thanks. See you at school… Good night, Hikki-”

Yuigahama waved her hand gently by her chest. I saw her off and began walking away.

After taking a few steps, I turned back and saw Yuigahama still standing outside the turnstiles. As our eyes met, she waved her hand even more widely. I raised my hand slightly in reply. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I quickly left the station.

All alone, I hurried home against the night wind.

At this point, I had completed all the tasks that I scheduled for today. I also finished as much of the preparations as I could.

The only thing left to do is to *end things properly*.

Interlude 6

Another night that I can't get drunk.

Even if my throat tells me that the wine is hot, the warmth never seemed to drench my heart.

Ever since that day, never once had I felt uplifted when I held up the wineglass, only feelings of hate loom within me.

As I swallowed what remained of my fifth glass of wine, I reached out to the wine bottle while considering another drink, but my hand stopped in mid-air as I was about to grab the bottleneck.

The four-person table felt unusually broad, no matter what kind of wine I'd chosen, no matter how many glasses I drank, no matter who I called over for company, none of those seemed to fill this emptiness within.

On my palm lies a book that I read halfway through. I tried opening it, but not once had I managed to flip across the current page, and not once had that bookmark left its original position. Even if I'm aware of how the story will unfold in the end, I continued searching for the true ending it deserves, which is why the story shall continue without reaching a conclusion.

The one correct ending that has no lies in it will probably never arrive, but if someone could at least prove the very existence of this possibility, I will probably feel satisfied with it.

I let my thoughts flow into the already empty glass, and drank it all up alongside the seemingly empty air. As my line of sight passed through the curved surface of the glass, projecting itself onto the empty seat in front of me, a beauty smiled wickedly through the glass, as if she's making fun of herself.

The woman on the glass surface suddenly faded to be replaced by the figure of another person. As I took a better look, it's the girl that should have went back some time ago. Did she run all the way here? I wondered upon seeing her shoulders heave up and down.

"Have you forgotten something?"

I handed her a woolen blanket, signaling her to have a seat. She obediently sat in her original position. As I held onto my cheeks, wondering what important matter made her turn back, she gripped firmly onto her skirt and the blanket underneath her knees, and said with a seemingly confused tone:

"I...I still believe that what you said just now was wrong...the codependency you told us of."

I rolled my eyes upon hearing those words, did she seriously come all the way back here to talk to me about this? It took a while for me to have a clear image of the situation.

I see, so she was here today in order to protect him from me. Instead of viewing it as her being possessive, to describe it as her being protective would sound much more accurate.

As much as I wanted to praise her in a straightforward way, now that she has the guts to challenge me directly it seems that I have no other choice but to accept it. While I prefer not to place the blame on my genes, it is true that my annoying side is similar to that of my mother.

To be honest, I don't really intend to say such things to her. It's troublesome, and I don't have that much leisure time to be wasted on her. I can't really get myself to do such a thing either, as getting hated by such a cute girl is not a pleasant thing to do, even for myself.

But compared to that, my refusal to leave a mistake uncorrected is much stronger.

As my frustration continued to grow, I poured every drop of the remaining wine into the glass.

Interlude 6-2

The contents within the wineglass turmoiled like waves of scarlet blood, small bubbles among those waves leaped up and down just like my heart right now. After I scurried back from the train station to here, words proceeded to gush out from me along with my gasping breath.

'That's how I see it, the codependency relationship the three of you have.'

'Codependency', a word that I was never aware of before, and a word that I couldn't understand at all. That's how I've always been, my inability to comprehend such complex ideas, and my ability to act as if I couldn't understand it. Even if there are times that I truly failed to get it.

But that term that she said, a term so simple to the point that I can't pretend to not understand it, a term so simple that I can only understand it.

"Does that apply to me.....too?"

My heart that should've calmed down by now started beating rapidly again. Even though the answer was never something that I've never pleaded for, never waited for, here I am seeking desperately for answers.

She started to laugh… and then displayed a very concerned expression.

"Isn't that so? After all, Hikigaya relies on Gahama-chan a lot, too. In fact, Gahama-chan, you enjoyed all the attention he gave, to the point that you're willing to do anything for him.....you know, you're sicker than what you think, Gahama-chan."

"No...that's not how it is."

My lips are trembling as I spouted those discontinuous words, shaking my head. No, this is wrong, something feels really wrong in her statement...

“Now that they have already become the way they are, Gahama-chan, you have to grow up and get over it.”

She seemed to have said something else with that gentle voice, but I can’t hear it anymore.

“Wanting to do something for his sake...shouldn’t that be natural? After seeing him look so depressed, of course I would want to get his spirits up, of course I would want to stay beside him. So, that’s not it...”

It's frustrating, frustrating to the point that I glared at someone out of rage for the first time. The moist air within my lungs burst out along with my words, leaving my throat completely dried out. Holding the ends of my skirt tightly to the point where I could feel my nails driving through the cloth and into my flesh, I continued staring at her, refusing to avert my line of sight.

She simply gazed at all of this with a mature expression, and then closed her eyes all of a sudden. Then she said in a voice so low that it felt like she was praying:

“And can you.....call that thing something genuine?”

“I don’t know.”

I had always been trying to figure it out ever since that day, what he meant by something genuine. But in the end, I still don’t get it. My voice started to sound unsettled, my eyes blurred by tears and looking down before I knew it.

“But that thing, those feelings, they’re definitely not codependency, nothing similar to it.”

As I looked back up, she continued gazing at me with the same expression and opened her mouth for a second just to look away without speaking.

A piercing sensation began to fill my chest, the tears that seemed to have dried out started dripping again.

“Otherwise, it wouldn’t feel so painful...this thing that feels... so painful...”

The pain in my chest, the pain within my heart, the pain that follows me everywhere.

Everything within me, as if they're in vain, lamented and screamed my love for you over and over again.

Chapter 8: As I pray, at the very least, that I won't make any more mistakes.

When would winter end? There weren’t many clear experiences I could draw from so far, so the days were only somewhat noticeable in their temperature changes. But even so, I was strangely aware of the turning points, probably as we reached milestone after milestone.

That’s why, to me, the end of winter is probably today.

Yesterday, I’d shut myself away in my room all day long, exchanging mail with Zaimokuza, refreshing the SNS, thoroughly checking for any errors on the homepage; just spending the day off completely restless.

Then comes the Monday that opens the week. The Monday everyone detests. The Monday when the problems that occurred on the weekend get reported.

Going to school, the classroom was filled with the atmosphere of a year’s end. Because of excitement from the graduation season, the conversation topics were mostly about future courses, plans for the spring break, or

even about the final tests. Excluded from all these casual chats was me, alone at my seat, just silently listening to it all.

What I was waiting for was the after-school chime.

Through Yukinoshita Haruno, the bait had been spread. The prom that had been cordoned off based on self-restraint had another even flashier proposal. The subset of caregivers opposing the prom wouldn't be able to overlook this information. Above all, because their window of argument had already been established, they would probably make their move faster than they did before; both today and tomorrow, too.

And it seemed that prediction wasn't that off the mark.

When the afternoon classes ended, as the atmosphere began to lighten, Hiratsuka-sensei came toward the classroom as if she had been hurrying somewhat. She peered in through the door and when our eyes met, she smiled tiredly.

"Hikigaya. Do you have a moment after this? You're being called in."

As if Hiratsuka-sensei had said a joke, the rest remaining in the classroom slightly turned their heads.

Already having packed up and gathered my things, I took my bag and headed off. Hiratsuka-sensei smiled bitterly at that.

"The reason you're being called… Looks like you already know why."

"Sort of, since I can think of a lot of reasons. I used to be called in every time something happened."

"Seriously."

Hiratsuka-sensei shrugged her shoulders and her bitter smile appeared somewhat sad. I also pretended to smile bitterly while averting my eyes.

And what came within my line of sight were those groups doubting us.

On one side were several students giving us strange looks, while there were those at the back of the classroom giving us their usual reactions.

Miura didn't seem to have any interest in us at all and looked bored while twirling her hair with her fingertips. Ebina-san was looking at me while nodding. Tobe's group was smirking while whispering, "tsubeh. Hikitani-kun screwed up, beh". Damn you, Tobe...

But there was just one in the middle, Hayama, that maintained a cold smile like a statue and fixed his gaze this way.

I have no reason to know what he meant by that and I'm not interested either, but I can tell just from looking that he's pitying me.

And finally, there was Yuigahama. Quickly able to guess the situation based on Hiratsuka-sensei's presence here, she stopped packing her things and only grabbed her nearby coat with her as she ran out.

Exiting into the corridor, Yuigahama caught up to us. She probably intended to come to help me, but I can't keep relying on Yuigahama for this. Always, up until now, I came this far by relying on her. I wanted to complete the finishing touches by myself.

"It's just me who was appointed to be there, right?"

"That's right. Well, I don't know if it's an appointment or not. I've just been told to call in the person responsible."

"Yeah, that would be me."

Hiratsuka-sensei exhaled with an expression mixed between bitterness and sarcastic amazement. Yuigahama watched our exchange with a long face before uneasily opening her mouth to speak,

"But I think it'd be good if I went as well…"

"It's okay, I'll do it properly."

I said it so nonchalantly that Yuigahama opened her mouth to say something, but just before she could, her words had caught in her throat. And then, with lips pursed, she made a slight nod.

Her strange behavior caught my attention and when I turned my gaze to face her, Hiratsuka-sensei struck my shoulder.

“There’s no need to worry, I’m here too. Nothing weird is going to happen.”

Hiratsuka-sensei said to put her at ease and Yuigahama nodded by returning a faint smile.

“Then I’ll be off for a bit.”

“Yeah. If something happens, call me.”

As she spoke, Yuigahama lightly made a soldier’s gesture with a raised hand while Hiratsuka-sensei and I began to walk again. I intensely watched her figure, clad in a white coat with hands deep in her pockets, as I followed one step behind.

“Is this according to your plan?”

Hiratsuka-sensei slightly moved her neck and asked my reflection on the glass of the windows extending across the corridor.

“...Sort of, for the most part.”

Honestly speaking, not everything has been going according to plan, but the very minimum has been achieved. To me, this is a job well done. As I answered, I could tell Hiratsuka-sensei was smiling wryly behind her back.

“That’s very much like your methods. Do you have a chance of winning?”

“There doesn’t have to be. In any case, there isn’t another way.”

As the continuing glass of the windows changed to walls, I could no longer infer Hiratsuka-sensei’s expression. I could only hear a sighing voice escaping.

“...That’s not a bad answer. I like it, that kind of thing.”

As she spoke, Hiratsuka-sensei’s figure unexpectedly disappeared. I knew she’d just turned the corner and was going down the stairs, but even so, I quickly moved my legs faster. Becoming aware of what I was doing, I smiled bitterly.

Someday soon, will I end up looking for that figure every time something happens? Because I was imagining stuff like that, I had stopped walking at some point. As I slowly went down the stairs one step at a time, the distance between us began to widen. Just like this, I will surely have to come to terms with separating from this person.

Neither of us spoke and the only sounds came from our footsteps.

As we approached the landing, Hiratsuka-sensei's white coat flowed as she turned half her body towards me.

"Hikigaya, do you have time sometime soon? It doesn't have to be today. It can be tomorrow or some other day."

Hearing that, I thought about my schedule for a moment. Today, I still had to clean up things here and that would take up some time, but I really had nothing to do tomorrow and afterward.

There probably wouldn't be any club activities anymore. Regardless of how the prom turns out, there likely wouldn't be.

I was late in replying because I was suddenly thinking about all of this. Meanwhile, our footsteps resounded as if filling in the silence.

"...Well, I'm pretty much free."

"Really. Okay then…"

Walking forward, Hiratsuka-sensei was also slowly thinking about something as she cut off for a moment.

"...Okay then, let's go for ramen!"

With only her neck turned this way, and her long hair shaking, I could see her smiling as if she'd won something.

I replied with a bitter smile and a nod.

8-2

At last, we reached the reception office and Hiratsuka-sensei knocked on the door. The voice of the person who requested me coolly sounded out and I remember having heard that voice somewhere before. It seemed the visitor was Yukinoshita's mother after all.

I followed Hiratsuka-sensei into the room and someone gracefully standing next to the window turned around to face us. The person before us, wearing a wisteria-colored kimono moderately decorated with peach blossoms, was truly an unimaginable beauty.

Coffee had already been prepared and placed at the seat of honor. Yukinoshita's mother sat there and, with a friendly voice, asked me to sit down as well. I quietly obeyed and Hiratsuka-sensei took a seat next to me.

"We met the other day as well, haven't we."

"Yes... Nice meeting you, then."

I answered with a twitching smile. Her formal smile overlapped with Haruno-san's features and frankly, I wasn't very good at dealing with it. As if she could tell that I was nervous from my state, Yukinoshita's mother raised a hand to her mouth; smiling as if she was lovingly looking at a small animal.

"Then let's start over… May I ask about your reason for being here today?"

When Hiratsuka-sensei cut in, Yukinoshita's mother gently smiled and took out her smartphone.

"Ah, that's right. Then getting straight into it… This, were you the one who thought of it?"

On the low table was the phone screen that was displaying the official site of the dummy prom.

Absorbed in the thought that this was the finale of the match, I laughed a little. Because I'd wanted this shameless attitude calling for diplomacy during this critical moment. While this sense of crisis is being called an accidental trigger, there had been no other option but to call for a compromise.

"It could be the opinion of several students. These days there are quite some flashy high school students."

As I said a line I'd been told somewhere before, reworded with sarcasm mixed in, Hiratsuka-sensei's elbow hit my side. Yukinoshita's mother looked at that with a smile and responded with a certain tone of voice,

"I see…"

Yukinoshita's mother placed her hands on her temples and narrowed her eyes. Her gestures reminded me of the gaze of big cats as they went into hunting mode.

I started to get a bad feeling as sweat gradually began to run down my scalp. I don't mean to brag, but I've never been wrong about bad feelings.

Suddenly, Yukinoshita's mother began to speak,

"Running another proposal isn't a bad move, but the flaws stand out a bit. Also, even if you increase the number of choices, it will still be difficult without resolving the fundamental problems. What's your opinion on that part?"

That gaze and tone of voice had changed to become so much colder than before. A cold chill ran down my spine. The last part of what she said seemed a question aimed towards me, but my head couldn't get around to an answer.

Yukinoshita's mother rejected the dummy prom proposal we'd made because it was just something used to run against the original proposal. Had she heard something from Haruno-san in advance? No, judging from her actions the other day, she wouldn't go out of her way to tell her mother when it seemed there would be discord.

In other words, it simply means she saw through our plans. In addition, because she could point it out from the beginning, our plans were crushed before they even started.

I should have replied, but I had lost my words and I was left dumbfoundedly looking at Yukinoshita's mother.

The person on the other side was calm and composed as she hid her mouth with a folding fan, smiling as if she was enjoying this. That figure appeared as if she was looking forward to what hand I would play next.

Though she could make a face like that, I could only wear a bitter smile. The things I had thought of saying had all blown away. As long as her first hand remained, calling out my plan as something just used to run against the original, there was no meaning in exchanging words about it. Besides, the dummy prom plan had been seen through by both Hayama and Haruno-san the very first time they saw it as well. I had already lost the moment I thought it would go through someone like Yukinoshita's mother.

"The real problem is the one about exercising self-restraint at a prom; the fact that we can expect a subset of students to rebel against it is true. The risk of this happening outside our awareness still exists."

Seeing me unable to reply, Hiratsuka-sensei promptly intervened.

"Therefore, it might be wise to choose situations that fall within our management to some extent. The Student Council's side has revised their plans to find a way that will satisfy both sides."

Hiratsuka-sensei handed documents that she'd set on the side table to Yukinoshita's mother and gave me a part too. Flicking through them, I could see the revisions from what Yukinoshita and the others had said the other day. Yukinoshita's mother also examined the documents but had a dull reaction to them with a somewhat sour expression.

Hiratsuka-sensei's followup itself was in line with my ideas. But seeing the dummy prom completely as just an alternative plan made our persuasive attempts feel strongly like we were on the defense. Yukinoshita's mother also had a troubled look as she turned her neck,

“I see… It looks as if you’re bringing together components to make persuasions, but I wonder if they would understand… Because there could be people on the inside who are also stubborn about this.”

Yukinoshita’s mother mixed her words with a bitter smile. Though her wording was different, it was something I’d heard somewhere before.

“Even if we continue talking like this, to change everyone’s opinions they’d need to be here.”

Not paying attention as the other side continued to talk, I lightly closed my eyes and searched through my memories. If I remembered correctly, it was Yukinoshita Haruno who’d said it; that she didn’t care about how the prom itself turned out.

In that case, for what reason did Yukinoshita’s mother bring up that subject here?

The answer was simple. Because it had resulted in a problem.

Yukinoshita’s mother had a way of solving it and the one tool required existed here. It would do nothing but erase the dispute; her ideals and actions didn’t matter. She had a habit of seeing things as problems and avoiding uproars. Thus, she was just playing along.

But that’s why we proposed the dummy prom; to lead her to something more reasonable. That aim itself was definitely not wrong.

It’s just that where we’d drawn the line was wrong. Methods are methods, tools are tools, and to that end, there was no concept of friend or foe.

This time, Yukinoshita’s mother was the messenger. She was only a negotiator sent by the other party.

My opponent in this game isn’t Yukinoshita’s mother. She was just another piece on the board; the strongest queen.

In that case, there was still a hand I could play.

There was probably just one person in this world who could do this. It was something only I could use, even if I wouldn't be forgiven for using it just once; the absolute lowest and worst means.

However, if I only had one card left in my hand, then I had no choice but to play it.

"To persuade that 'everyone' you speak of, can we ask for your cooperation?"

Maybe my statement was unexpected, Yukinoshita's mother tilted her head. A movement so innocent, I dropped a smile. Their reactions when they're told something out of their expectations were truly so similar.

"There is a way of persuading them, isn't there? Then wouldn't the end result change depending on who says it?"

What's important isn't "what is said", but "who says it". That may be an overused phrase, but it is the truth. The subset of stubborn caregivers and such could be convinced if it was Yukinoshita's mother saying it instead of me. They would also know they'd be dealing with an opponent who held a higher rank than themselves and it's because of this, I was asking for her assistance.

The nature of this game was nothing other than to take the opponent's queen.

"...In fact, it wouldn't be very persuasive if it was someone like me, who isn't really known by anybody, doing the talking."

With a dry laugh and a pitiful voice, I had played a check on the unknown black king.

"That's not true. I think you've done well in such a short time. It was to the extent that I became curious as to who it was."

After Yukinoshita's mother smiled and spoke as if she was truly impressed, she turned her neck.

"My apologies, had I asked you what your name is?"

And then she lowered her eyebrows and asked like she wasn't that sorry.

In a moment, Hiratsuka-sensei held my wrist to restrain me. She understood well that if I said my name here, the other side would get some kind of meaning out of it.

But my turn had been over the moment the other side had asked. All that was left was to fulfill my role as another piece on the board.

This piece usually never had any use. They were good-for-nothings that had no place on the board except to take up space.

But, in just one circumstance, were they capable of removing the queen from play.

"It's Hikigaya Hachiman."

When I named myself, Hiratsuka-sensei breathed out a small sigh as if she had given up and let go of my wrist.

"Hikigaya…"

Yukinoshita's mother placed a hand to her mouth while repeating my name in a small voice and wandered her gaze downwards. Seeming like she finally remembered something, she raised her head.

"I see… You're…"

I returned her gaze with a formal smile. I can't do it as well as Hayama or Haruno-san, but I tried as best I could. Maybe it was effective because Hiratsuka-sensei looked like she was playing dumb.

The problem starts here. As I've named myself, I couldn't afford to make any mistakes in my statements or behavior. Whether it be coercion, insolence, or even being overly sucking-up, any of it could be seen as intimidation.

And so, as long as I've been cornered, my mistakes from now on will become my fault and become something the other side can take advantage of. That's why I have to act with sincerity and convey that we have no ill intentions.

“We caused you terrible trouble on that occasion. Your parents were left with many things to do, please excuse us for being unable to greet them.”

Her words were as flat as possible and her lowered head was neither too shallow or deep. Just fulfilling it with as much duty as she was responsible for. There weren’t any other unnecessary emotions within.

This was one form of diplomatic etiquette. It wasn’t an excessive show, but just enough.

Maybe she thought the message was correctly conveyed, she returned to her composed self.

“We truly apologize for the trouble caused by one of our own. How was your leg injury? We offer our sincere apologies for the inconvenience it must have caused.”

I acted positively in response to Yukinoshita’s mother deeply lowering her head.

“I made a full recovery thanks to you. To the point where my leg became even sturdier than before. You can watch me dance when the prom is on.”

At that moment, I moved my foot around as my shoes made tapping noises, and showed off how random my step work was. As I did that, Yukinoshita’s mother watched, placing her hand to her mouth as she pleasantly laughed.

“What bad manners.”

Hiratsuka-sensei hit my waist with a smack and thanks to that, I could finally stop clowning around. I scowled at myself for acting so foolishly and I refrained from letting out a deep sigh.

Still smiling as Yukinoshita’s mother watched, her eyes narrowed and she murmured to herself.

“...has quite the nerve.”

Her gaze was so cold it made me feel as if she was evaluating me, and I was being frozen solid. In those eyes that looked as if they could see through everything, I felt nauseous.

But that gaze soon loosened. Yukinoshita's mother opened her folding fan and hid her mouth as she giggled. That was this person's way of laughing honestly.

"I'll do it."

"Thank you for your help."

Until the very end, I tried to maintain my composure as I answered; wiping the sweat from my forehead while pretending I was combing my fringe. My shirt was tightly sticking to me from cold sweat and my throat was so dry it hurt even just by breathing in.

In hindsight, all I'd done was name myself and talk about that incident in the past. That name, that conversation, those themselves had no meaning. That's why whoever heard that can give whatever meaning they want to it.

Yukinoshita's mother had been smiling for some time now, but it disappeared as she flicked the fan closed.

"Alright… let me try talking to the caregivers. It would help if the teacher could also be present."

"We will adjust to your schedule."

I listened as the adults discussed business. My nervousness from before had been cleanly cut and I began to feel a surge of tiredness. Without realizing it, I was staring up at the ceiling, sighing deeply, and standing in a daze.

"Hikigaya. Can you do something for me?"

"Y-Yes."

After suddenly being talked to, I straightened my back in panic. It looked like the conversation had progressed quite a lot while I hadn't been

listening.

“I can’t leave after this. Can you tell Yukinoshita to continue the revised plan for the prom? How you tell her, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Ha… I got it...”

Hiratsuka-sensei just nodded as I answered without having understood the flow of the conversation. Her eyes were telling me to hurry up and go. Well, it was true that we didn’t have much time left before the prom. The decision-makers should be promptly told of this.

After I stood up, Yukinoshita’s mother sitting on the other end smiled.

“Hikigaya-kun. Let us meet again.”

“Hahaha… Please excuse me.”

Playing it off with a dry laugh and without giving a direct answer, I bowed and left the reception room. If possible, I didn’t want to meet her ever again...

8-3

I quietly walked down the school building in the approaching twilight and finally reached the Student Council room.

I stood in front of the door and knocked. There was only a slight delay before there was an answer, and I breathed out a deep sigh.

There were no sounds of footsteps and the door opened quietly. The heater must have been turned on as a flow of warm air escaped from the narrow opening.

The person holding the doorknob was a girl with plaited hair and glasses. If I remembered correctly, this was the secretary. She seemed to know who I was as she let me inside.

I lightly lowered my head in thanks and entered, and right in front of me was the vice-president at his desk, crying "there's no time… there's no time..." while doing his work. Good, good, suffer some more.

I looked around the inside of the room, but Yukinoshita wasn't here. Just Isshiki at the desk on the far end, gnawing on snacks and tilting her neck as she looked at me.

"...I hadn't called for you."

Am I not allowed to come if I'm not called for? Yep, not allowed. When I opened my mouth to announce my reason for coming, Isshiki clapped her hands.

"Ah, are you here to help? Aiming to be a servant? A free labor worker?"

What's with that super development? Just how much are you leaping? Having to deal with Irohasu who hadn't changed, my shoulders dropped as some strength left my body.

"Expect that for next year. I'll introduce you to a promising rookie. Anyway, where's Yukinoshita?"

I asked after the exchange of our usual remarks. Isshiki turned her neck and glanced at the unornamented desk Yukinoshita used.

“Haa, now that you mention it, she’s not here.”

Isshiki seemed to only notice this now. Seeing that reaction, it probably hadn’t been that long since she’d left.

She probably left because the heater was too strong. Anyway, if Yukinoshita wasn’t here then there was no reason for me to be here either.

“Then nevermind. Later.”

“Ah, hey, what’s with that?! Didn’t you come for some reason?!”

Isshiki called out and stopped me as I tried to quickly leave the room. I suddenly realized when she said “reason”. I hadn’t been told specifically to tell Isshiki, but I figured she should know. I stopped walking and turned around.

“Ah, that’s right. They’ve decided to go with your proposal for the prom. You can go ahead and start on it. Good luck.”

“Haa… Huh?”

Isshiki’s mouth dropped open and turned her entire upper body along with her neck. If she heard the details, I’d have to tell her the whole story of how it all happened, which would be too much of a pain. I’ll take my leave while Isshiki’s head is still trying to comprehend it.

8-4

I hadn't decided on where I was going, but even so, my legs didn't hesitate and naturally headed towards that place. I thought she must be there.

In the empty hallway of the special building. It's been almost the whole year that I've passed through here towards the clubroom. I would probably still reach it even if I closed my eyes.

Finally, I could see the door. I stood in front of it, traced it, then placed my fingers on the handle. It should be made of the same materials as any other classroom door, but I felt as if I would never forget this coldness and hardness.

If I pulled with some strength, the door would make a noise and slide open.

What was in front of me wasn't a deviant, but a regular classroom.

However, the reason I felt this classroom was different was likely because a certain girl was there.

In the setting sun and the blowing wind, Yukinoshita Yukino was standing by the window, gazing outside.

The window was wide open as if to change the atmosphere in the clubroom not used by anyone in a while and the curtain was swaying in the wind.

Even if the world ended, this girl would be here, like this. This sight was so much like a painting that I was having these delusions.

When I saw that, both my body and mind had stopped.

——I was lost in admiration even when I was defeated.

Yukinoshita noticed the visitor and she held her hair swaying in the wind as she turned around. Her eyes widened as if surprised for a moment but she quickly expressed a smile.

“Hello.”

“...Yeah.”

As I answered her, Yukinoshita closed the window. The swaying curtains also stopped and all sound disappeared inside the clubroom.

The sunset brilliantly filled this tranquil space. While my eyes narrowed due to the brightness, Yukinoshita leaned on the glass window and the glossy black hair on her shoulder shone even further.

“Do you have a reason to be here?”

“No, I was told to contact you about work.”

“I see, I’m sorry I made you go out of your way to come all the way here.”

“You don’t have to worry about it, it doesn’t take that much time and effort.”

As I answered, I pulled the chair closest to the door. Sitting where I had always sat, I lightly gestured to Yukinoshita to also sit down. It looked as if Yukinoshita was taken aback, but as I waited for her, she sighed as if giving up and sat on the chair closest to the window.

“About the prom, ultimately your revised plan has safely passed. It looks like the subset of caregivers against the idea will be persuaded and will have to come to terms with it.”

It should have been the first time Yukinoshita had heard of this, but she didn’t look so surprised. She didn’t move a single eyebrow and was just silently listening. While I thought it was strange, I continued to say the last part.

“That’s why… It’s my loss.”

“Yes… It’s your win.”

Finally, Yukinoshita deeply sighed and muttered.

“...Why?”

“It ended up this way because of your methods again. In essence, it’s your win.”

Remembering the connection between the feeling of self-scorn and laughing at myself, I spat out the doubt that had been living in my chest.

“...Even so, you foresaw this. Didn’t you know my methods by then? That makes you the winner after all.”

Hayama Hayato and Yukinoshita Haruno both knew of the dummy prom plan and had immediately seen through it. I’d barely managed to play check on the king by getting Yukinoshita’s mother on our side. Then, in that case, it wouldn’t be any mystery that Yukinoshita Yukino, who held the same specs, would have seen through Hikigaya Hachiman’s shallow thinking.

In the first place, the way Yukinoshita and Isshiki presented their idea had already been prone to errors. But that itself became the clue to my idea of presenting two choices, where one choice would be crushed and the other would progress.

As I questioned her, Yukinoshita hid her eyes and her neck shook.

“That’s not certain. As long as the faction opposing the prom itself existed, our reasoning wouldn’t even establish itself… But I figured if it was you, you’d be able to do something about it.”

It was just like Yukinoshita to have foreseen it. Just the smile she added at the end was connected to what she’d said. I wanted to deny it, but I could only foolishly lift one side of my cheek.

“Trust is a heavy thing… It surprises me.”

“I was also surprised. I just naturally thought in that way.”

Yukinoshita smiled bitterly like she was being shy. I felt breathless seeing that. As I wondered how to reply back, Yukinoshita murmured in a fragile voice.

“I depended on you so much that I thought like that…”

Those eyes gazing at me were blurry with regret and sorrow. I couldn't bear being seen with those eyes, so I averted my own and quickly spoke,

"...Even if that's the case, it doesn't change the fact it's your win. The condition for victory was to make the prom a reality using our own methods, was it not? What made it happen was your plan, your methods."

"...You're okay with it being my win?"

Her tone of voice as she asked was feeble, and I wanted to cut her off from talking that way, so I nodded three times while looking away.

"Then… The match is hereby over. Will you listen to what I have to say?"

I couldn't pretend to not hear what she'd said. As I looked at Yukinoshita, it seemed as if she'd abandoned her weakness as she clenched her fists and tightened her lips. Her eyes were shaking with determination as she waited for my impending reply.

"...No, it won't be that way. It's true that it's your win this time. But that doesn't mean you've won the entire competition."

"In regards to the conditions for victory, winning this match means winning the competition, and the other person must listen to what the winner says… I'm sure I said that."

I became aware of my lips drying up as I watched her explain it indifferently and declare it. I remembered hearing those words in the depths of my memories. While in both impatience and desperation, I somehow opened my mouth,

"...That was just a figure of speech, a difference in opinion."

As Yukinoshita let out a trembling sigh, she murmured with a sweet tone of voice as if she was whispering sweet nothings,

"Then… You decide."

As I saw that fleeting transparent smile, I came to terms with my own defeat. She knows I wouldn't be able to answer if she said that.

While securing Yukinoshita Yukino's autonomy, as long as I've decided to respect her own decisions, I can't allow her to entrust her decisions to anyone else. Even if that someone was me.

That's exactly why she accepted this match. For this one moment, all the disagreements, all the disorders, all the misunderstandings; she had brushed them all aside. To properly end this match and this relationship.

"I can't make the decision… That's the same as me deciding the winner arbitrarily. Yuigahama is also in this match. And it's judged at Hiratsuka-sensei's own discretion and bias. And, and it's sort of…"

I couldn't accept that ending. I quickly spoke as I couldn't allow things to end like this. I didn't know how to make her wait for just a moment, nor did I know how I could stop her. Forgetting how to even breathe, I was reaching out toward nothingness.

"...I'll be honest."

As she interrupted my voice, Yukinoshita smiled sadly and faced me with wet eyes.

"It was fun. It was my first time. I was happy thinking that the time we spent together was comfortable…"

Being told she was truly happy with a face that looked as if she would cry, I could no longer deny it nor stop her. As I lost strength in my arms and lowered them, Yukinoshita nodded as if she was thanking me and continued to speak,

"I'd never argued and fought as we did… nor cried in front of others. I was so nervous even when we went out together, and it was the first time I was so unsure of what to do… I didn't even know it was okay to rely on someone. That's why it all went wrong somewhere…"

I looked up at the ceiling as I listened to her speak so quickly about unsolicited things in a trembling voice. The distant sunset hurt my eyes, but even so, I couldn't close them and just let out a damp sigh.

“This kind of imitation-like relationship is wrong. It’s definitely different to what you desired.”

Her monologue tied things together like that, and when I realized the end was coming, I finally looked at her face.

“I’m okay. I’m… okay now. I was saved by you.”

Wiping her glistening tears with her fingertips, Yukinoshita Yukino smiled beautifully,

“That’s why, we’ll end this match, and this relationship, with this. ”

If that was her answer, I had no reason to make an objection. The objective to help her was achieved, the co-dependency was resolved by ending the relationship, and the boy’s willpower stood firm.

I didn’t happen to have the mind of fulfilling wishes. The club activities and work ended here.

That’s why I had nothing left. Every reason I had to get involved with her vanished.

“Alright… It’s my loss.”

I sighed deeply as I spoke as if I was spitting everything out. To fulfill the last responsibility left to me, I questioned her.

“I’ll listen to whatever you say. What should I do? ...If it’s something I can do, I’ll grant you whatever you want.”

In truth, I’d vowed to at least grant that much, no matter what.

Yukinoshita let out a sigh as if in relief, and she told me something she must have been holding close to her dearly.

“Please grant Yuigahama-san’s wish.”

“Are you fine with that as your request?”

“Yes, this is my request.”

To Yukinoshita, who closed her eyes and nodded as if caring for someone, I answered her with the gentlest smile I could make.

“...Alright.”

Following our last exchange, I stood up from my chair. Yukinoshita didn’t move from her seat and the distance between us began to widen just by the sound of my footsteps as I finally reached the corridor.

And then, softly and gently, I closed the door as if stopping myself from doing so.

Interlude 7

The door was closed, but to prevent it from being opened once again I locked it tightly with the key.

One time for the last time.

I gently stroked the door, chiseling the surface into my skin.

As it became colder.

As it started to hurt even more.

I became able to believe the answer I chose was the genuine one.

Since I had no other ways to confirm it, I didn't know if that was the correct answer. Thus the search for my mistakes would never end.

Just because of one simple genuine thing. I yearned for it, admired it, became impatient and then complicated it. Without being able to even cry, my body burned.

After burning out, the only thing remaining was a twisted sham.

But still, to me, that was something irreplaceable because it's clothing I can't change.

Let me at least tuck it away, to prevent it from being destroyed. And thus everything will end.

—Please, let this be the right ending.

This was my prayer. My hands left the door.

One step away, two steps away. I went to a place where my hands couldn't reach it anymore.

I don’t look back anymore.

Translation Notes

1. » A Street Fighter 2 reference about a specific moveset for Chun Li that counters almost every character, especially Zangief, there's a specific name for the move but I have no idea what it is.
2. » Well known Shogi player, has the title of "Eternal Seven Champ"
3. » Apparently hokkaido chicken fritters in Japanese has a similar pronunciation to Zangief, really Wataru? A food pun?
4. » A rule in shogi, where a player with negative points will need to get a winning hand or he'll lose, not sure how the roasted chicken fits into the reference.
5. » "Eternal Seven Loner" in Japanese is a pun that sounds similar to Habu Yoshiharu.
6. » The 65th generation Yokozuna.
7. » The slogan for a Japanese recruitment website.
8. » Yeah its a LN title.
9. » Probably a Galactic Police Gaban reference.
10. » Probably Asahi beer's superdry slogan.
11. » Neta Grand Blue - a TV anime aired in Summer 2018 on the everyday life of a diving club.
12. » I'm ded.
13. » The guardian gods of Buddhism who stand at the entrance gate of a Buddhist temple.
14. » Neta comes from Asobi Asobase, a TV anime aired in Summer 2018.
15. » Zaimokuza in Samurai tone.
16. » The adjective was オシャンな, according to NicoDict, it's used to describe a type of Nico Live broadcasters that egg viewers to do stuff.
17. » Neta - NHK TV anime aired back in 2011.
18. » Coming of Age is a Japanese tradition.
19. » Higuchi Ichiyou was a famous Japanese novelist. Her portrait is printed on 5000 Yen bills. Furthermore, the Japanese title for 'Teenagers Vying for Tops' rhymes with 'research'.
20. » Dogeza: Japanese prostration
21. » I think this is a neta from Castle in the Sky. How rare!
22. » shuraba or pandemonium.

23. » Production Committees are described here in my favorite sakuga blog
24. » 'Oikon' is a drinking event where current club members invite graduating club members to celebrate their retirement.
25. » Ganbaru-zoi is a well-known catchphrase from Suzukaze Aoba, a character from TV anime New Game.
26. » Neta Tokyo Disneyland.
27. » Tokyo Disneyland, despite of its name, is actually located in the Chiba Prefecture.
28. » ホテル三日月竜宮城 literally translates to that.
29. » How dare you!
30. » In reference to Zombieland Saga, a TV anime aired in Winter 2018.
31. » Reddits in Japan.
32. » Exact same reaction as Chap 5 haha.
33. » Recall that this is the HS where Tamanawa is the President of the School Council.
34. » From Wikipedia - “The Johari window is a technique that helps people better understand their relationship with themselves and others. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory in psychology proposed by Abraham Maslow.”
35. » A kind of tropical fish.
36. » Referring to Overlord, a TV anime aired in Winter 2017.
37. » Shounan is the area southwest to Tokyo, between Kamakura and Enoshima.
38. » The point being, the parents will then naturally side with Plan B.
39. » Both words read Saikou in JP.
40. » Please imagine the scene.
41. » I guess since Hikigaya always wears a drowsy face.
42. » It’s all nitty gritty word usage details in JP and it’s hard to forcibly fit it into the English context. Hachiman is just trying to claim that he knows how to use the word 整う and Yukinoshita believes he doesn’t really.
43. » Shachuku.
44. » Osobayui could mean both ticklish or embarrassed/terekusai. I’m actually not sure which one I should take...
45. » 気遣い isn't really just consideration but a more subtle one... Not sure how to accurately translate it.
46. » Yes, that Hoe from CCS.

47. » CPA was also mentioned in previous chapters. In case you haven't read it or don't remember it's an association consists of presidents from all student activity clubs. Hayama is also the leader of it.
48. » 'Oikon' is a drinking event where current club members invite graduating club members to celebrate their retirement.
49. » In Japan, stamps can be used like signatures and possess the same legal authority to prove your identity.
50. » JP Ebay.
51. » Not sure who is Akkun is, but he seems to be a 2ch meme who have been stealing games and CDs from friends.
52. » Like that classic Dad Ikari pose in EVA.
53. » Yukinoshita and the student council.
54. » Referring to a wall and Hachiman.
55. » Osananajimi.
56. » The original line was 万策尽きた/bansaku tsukita, a famous catchphrase said by Director Kinoshita Seiichi from Shirobako. WW probably chose this line because Kinoshita and Zaimokuza are both chubby. Nice punchline WW.
57. » Parupint: the original term is パルプンテ, which is a magic spell used in RPG game Dragon Quest. File Attachment is File Tenpu in Japanese. Maybe WW thinks Parupinto sounds like FairuTenpu...
58. » The original text is オタサーの姫, used to describe those very few females in a club dominated by male otakus.
59. » Basically Zaimokuza is impressed by Hikigaya.
60. » Neta Yuru Camp.
61. » The original word is 背徳感/Haitoku-kan. Kumirei fans rise up.
62. » Reeves's Muntjac, or Kyon in Japanese, is a type of deer native to Southeast and East Asia. Also neta Kyon-kun from Suzumiya Haruhi.
63. » H.I.S. Co., Ltd. is a travel agency specializing in low-cost package tours. ‘We Were There’ is a Japanese romance manga by Yuki Obata.
64. » Datsueba, lit. old woman who strips clothes, is an old woman who sits at the edge of the Sanzu River in the Buddhist underworld.
65. » One Cut of the Dead, lit. "Don't Stop the Camera!", is a 2017 Japanese zombie comedy film directed by Shinichiro Ueda.
66. »Too rotten sounds the same as ‘not enough (beautiful)
67. » The original text for 'reaction/impressed' was 感慨, which has the same pronunciation as 灌漑/irrigation. They are both pronounced

kangai. Very funny, WW.

68. » Original textべべべ神拳撃, could be either a Jojo or Hokutou no Ken reference.
69. » 社畜/Shachuku
70. » 'You have not yet reached that stage yet' is a variation of 'You have not yet reached that zone yet.', or in Japanese 'その域に達していない'. It's a well-known comment made by Kyoto Animation after they fired Yamamoto Yutaka from the Lucky Star director position."
71. » High consciousness, or 意識高い, is an internet slang used to describe those who always present themselves in an exaggerated fashion and often talk in big words.
72. » Incoming raps. Buckle up! Pls break me free WW.
73. » Lincoln neta a TV show airing on TBS in Japan. Details see Wiki.
74. » Inage Kaigan - the area where Oregairu takes place.
75. » Neta 'Represent Chikyuu', a famous Japanese DJ group. These are all hip-hop terms.
76. » I guess WW wants to say emotionally'.

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